



# NO PEACE WITHOUT JUSTICE?

Online discourse analysis of Syrians' view on  
transitional justice and peace processes

**Wiedijk, Z. (Zana)**

Student number: 6856624

Master: International Development Studies

Supervisor: Dr. Femke van Noorloos

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# 1. Introduction

In the last decade, social media has become a large part of how people communicate with each other across the world and adoption rates are rising, including in the Global South (Pew Research Center, 2018). The widespread use of social media in the Global South makes it a helpful development tool and a fascinating source of information for development professionals and researchers to study. In other words, social media is both a driver of development and a social artefact that can tell us more about the people who use it (Nicholson, Nugroho, & Rangaswamy, 2016). In their article on social media for development, Nicholson, Nugroho, and Rangaswamy (2016) argue that social media offers development opportunities, especially within the human development discourse. Social media, they believe, could be used to increase people's capacities, which would allow them to improve their livelihoods and exercise their civil and political rights.

For instance, social media could be used for poverty alleviation by facilitating specific tasks such as sharing resources, information; opportunities for capacity building and collective action and influence. In addition, social media could reduce corruption and increase institutional transparency by making it easier for people to hold governments and institutions accountable. However, social media could also be harmful to development, as gaps in the accessibility of social media could create a digital divide. Furthermore, the same features that allow social media to expand people's capabilities could also make it easier for people to spread hatred and organize riots (Nicholson et al., 2016). For example, through echo chambers, where users' beliefs are reinforced through social media by only exposing them to information shared by like-minded individuals (De Angelis, 2011). Moreover, (repressive) governments could use social media to monitor, censor and control their people (Nicholson et al., 2016).

Despite these flaws, techno-optimists argue that social media could be used to overthrow repressive regimes, as was demonstrated, during the Arab Spring from 2010 to 2012, when a Facebook campaign sparked a wave of uprisings against corruption and repression across Arab countries culminating in the overthrow of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes. Several scholars argue that social media has played an essential role in mobilizing and spreading these uprisings to other Arab countries (Howard et al., 2011; Stepanova, 2011). However, social media has not prompted regimes to be overthrown everywhere in the Arab world. In Syria, for example, internet activists failed to mobilize enough people to effect regime change because they were disorganized and highly individualized due to Syria's weak civil society, lack of political debate and slow internet development. Some scholars even argued that social media aggravated divisions within Syrian society, further worsening the already tense relationship between the pro-regime and pro-opposition factions, resulting in a devastating civil war (De Angelis, 2011).

Yet, the Syrian conflict soon came to the attention of the international community as Syrians began to extensively document the atrocities of the conflict via social media, sparking international involvement in the conflict. Most countries supported the opposition because of the regime's violent response to demonstrations (Deutsche Welle, 2018; Lund, 2019), while the Russian and Iranian governments endorsed the regime because Syria was a key ally (Manfreda, 2019; The Economist,

2012). This involvement of foreign powers resulted in two parallel peace processes, known as the Geneva and Astana peace processes. The Geneva peace process was established early in the Syrian conflict by the Action Group for Syria led by former UN Special Envoy for Syria, Kofi Annan (Ki-moon, 2012). Interestingly, however, no Syrians were involved in the first round of the peace talks. Later on, the Action Group for Syria mainly involved the political opposition in the peace negotiations, which consisted of Syrian exiles who had little or no credibility in Syria (The Economist, 2013). As a result, the peace negotiations failed to produce lasting peace.

In response to this deadlock in the Geneva negotiations, Russia, Turkey and Iran, dubbed the Astana trio, have established complementary peace talks. Unlike the Geneva negotiations, they decided to involve the military opposition in the Astana negotiations (Doucet, 2017). While the Astana negotiations led to a reduction in violence, some Syrians argue that Russia is using the peace talks to shape the outcome of the Syrian conflict and ensure that the regime remains in power (Thepaut, 2020).

For all the international community's initiatives, there is still no lasting peace in Syria. Nevertheless, many Syrians are demanding that war criminals be brought to justice for their crimes during the Syrian conflict, despite the fact that such judicial proceedings are often initiated after violence has ended and that the Syrian conflict has not ended yet (Williams, Dicker, & Paterson, 2018). In addition, legal proceedings following civil wars are usually handled by the International Criminal Court (ICC), which specializes in these kinds of complicated cases, or a special international tribunal. However, to bring a case before the ICC, the state concerned must have signed the Rome Statute or be referred to the ICC by the UN Security Council. Neither options are possible for Syria, because Syria is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, and Russia and China vetoed all resolutions to refer Syria through the UN Security Council. Moreover, it is not possible to try war criminals in domestic courts because these are still under the control of the regime (Bdiwi, 2019).

Therefore, Syrian victims sought to meet their demands for justice, landing on universal jurisdiction. Universal jurisdiction allows states to try serious crimes regardless of where the crime was committed, the nationality of the alleged or convicted perpetrator, the victim, or any other relationship with the state exercising that jurisdiction. This enabled Syrians to bring war criminals to justice in states that had incorporated universal jurisdiction into their national laws. The downside of this approach is that war criminals can only be tried if they are in a state with universal jurisdiction laws. As a result, only low-level war criminals are tried through universal jurisdiction because major war criminals tend to protect themselves by avoiding these states (Bdiwi, 2019). Therefore, it is questionable whether universal jurisdiction will bring the Syrian quest for justice to a satisfactory ending.

According to many scholars, the success of peace and justice processes depends on whether society accepts them (Buchanan, 2014a; Williams et al., 2018). Social media is a good source of information for peace and justice scholars to study societies' views on peace and justice processes for a multitude of reasons. First, it allows individuals to express their opinions in public relatively safely. Second, it exposes many people's values, perspectives, and emotions who hold politically relevant views and want to express them. Third, users discuss contemporary topics, usually recent events,

giving researchers a glance at how people understand certain phenomena that can be interpreted in multiple ways. Fourth, ordinary people can react instantly to world events, with their reactions immediately being broadcast worldwide. While it is important to note that social media is not used by all citizens and therefore does not necessarily represent any society as a whole, the medium is becoming increasingly important for expression and communication. One clear advantage of this trend is that social media offers views that people decide to share on their own volition, giving a glimpse into different discourses within a society that might have been harder to obtain through more traditional sources (Jamal, Keohane, Romney, & Tingley, 2015).

One group that most clearly expresses its views are micro-celebrities, or ordinary people who increase their online popularity with the help of social media. They try to construct an image of themselves that the online community can easily consume through self-branding and strategic self-presentation. Normally, the followers of these micro-celebrities are perceived as their fan base (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). However, micro-celebrities in conflict situations are often politically motivated non-institutional actors who use their online popularity to attract public attention to their cause. Therefore, their audiences are mainly political allies, supporters, political opponents, and intermediaries who reach a wider audience, such as journalists. They use the attention they receive not for their own personal gain but to further their cause. Their reach and influence are often many times greater than that of official organizations or movements. In addition, these micro-celebrities are often the sole reporters of events during a conflict because traditional journalistic resources in conflict areas are often scarce (Tufekci, 2013).

Despite the potential scientific insights that social media can provide for international development and specifically peace and justice processes, it is rarely used as a research tool. Moreover, studies on social media have mainly focused on quantitative rather than qualitative data (Nicholson et al., 2016). The Syrian conflict is particularly fitting for a social media study, as it is described as the most socially mediated conflict in history (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). Furthermore, the Syrian case offers new insights into peace and justice paradigms because in Syria, unlike other states, the justice process had already started before the conflict had even ended (Bdiwi, 2019). Therefore, this thesis aims to research:

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*What are the main online discourses of Syrian micro-celebrities on Syrian transitional justice and peace processes? What can they teach us about the future/ next steps towards peace and justice in Syria?*

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This study contributes to international development studies in two ways: 1) by exploring discourses in a new way, namely through online discourse analysis of social media 2) by providing new insights into theories of peace and justice, in relation to social media, based on the unique case of Syria.

This thesis is organized as follows: it begins with a theoretical framework that describes existing theories surrounding discourses, social media, peace and justice. Next, it goes into the regional framework, which explains the multifaceted Syrian conflict in greater detail. The third chapter describes the methodology used for this study. The next part consists of four results chapters,

each dealing with a different event related to Syria's peace and justice process. The fourth part analyses the results of the discourse analysis based on the theories discussed in the theoretical framework. Finally, the conclusion will provide an answer to the research question.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This chapter consists of three parts explaining the different theories and concepts surrounding this thesis. The first part will describe the definition of discourses, how social media supports alternative discourses and what role micro-celebrities play in spreading these discourses. The second part examines the interaction between social media and development, particularly on social media's role in peace and conflict. Thirdly, the last part presents an overview of the debates surrounding peace and justice theories.

### Discourse

Discourse can be defined as the practice that gives meaning to the world around us (Ruiz Ruiz, 2009). It is present in many of the myriad ways that people express themselves, such as dance, customs, music, etc. However, the most common form of discourse that scholars focus on is spoken or written text for practical and theoretical reasons. The practical reason is that this form of discourse is easier to analyse, which is why the meaning of other forms of discourse, such as visual discourse, is often described in text. The theoretical reason is that verbal discourse is still one of the most common ways to convey and produce meaning in society (Ruiz Ruiz, 2009).

One of the most influential thinkers in the field of discourse was Michel Foucault, who argued that discourses not only give meaning to reality but are also a reflection of the power relations in society. Foucault posits that there is no universal discourse by which everyone describes reality, but that discourse changes depending on the time and culture in which it is construed. Discourses are produced by the powerful within society. They set the rules and categories that set the criteria for legitimizing knowledge and truth within the discursive order. Subsequently, their power is reinforced by the repetition of this discourse in society. However, because society is often unaware of this discourse, the ability of those in power to establish meaning and political intentions is hidden. Aside from that, other meanings and interpretations are excluded because their discourse fixes a specific meaning to a text, as well as eliminating the various meanings that could challenge or destabilize the meaning and power of their discourse. By constantly repeating this discourse, society normalizes and homogenizes it, making it a form of control and discipline exercised by those in power. Everything that does not correspond to the proclaimed truth of their discourse is deviant. In other words, it falls outside society. Therefore, according to Foucault, the task of scholars engaged in discourse analysis is to analyse the effects of power and uncover how dominant discourses exclude, marginalize, and suppress other realities (Adams, 2021). Hence, discourse is an essential topic in social theory and is applied in many academic disciplines (Van Dijk, 1997).

One way of interpreting the social and historical context of discourse is transitivity (Ali & Omar, 2016), which examines how speakers encode their perception of reality in language, indirectly conveying their worldview into the linguistic structure of a text. The study of transitivity concerns itself with how ideologies are discursively framed and supported in texts, pushing a reader's perception of the meaning of a text in a particular direction. Therefore, it is a reliable method of exposing the relationship between language and ideology, indicating a close relationship between



language structures and socially constructed reality. Hence, it is a useful linguistic tool for analysing and interpreting written texts, as texts form the basis for the transmission of ideas (Ali & Omar, 2016).

### Discourse and social media

Zappavigna (2012) argues that social media is essential in forming discourses nowadays, stating that the emergence of social media has transformed the Internet into an interpersonal resource rather than just an information network by allowing users to self-publish content such as blogs, vlogs, and microblogs. Furthermore, users can create an online profile to connect with others and be findable through social media, thereby supporting interpersonal connection. The capabilities of social media allow users to find people to bond around shared values, such as through hashtags, which Zappavigna (2012) defines as interpersonal search. In addition, users use social media for social search, which means that users ask their social network for recommendations and opinions. As a result, users create virtual communities where they utilize language to construct social bonds by creating interpersonal meaning or, in other words, discourse.

However, social media is not only an essential tool for forming discourses, but it also allows marginalized users to create alternative discourses. Traditional media often display the dominant discourse because news items tend to go through specific framing and gatekeeping procedures developed by the leading class (De Angelis & Badran, 2015). However, social media is not subject to these gatekeeper procedures, so everyone can produce and disseminate what they want to say and show on a large scale and at great speed via social media. This development has also been termed the deprofessionalization of media production (De Angelis, 2011). Since social media is cheap, fast and almost universally available, it offers a voice to people who are not represented by traditional media (Baytiyeh, 2019). Moreover, it is less easily controlled by the powerful than traditional media, making it possible to develop counter-discourses against the dominant discourse (Rohde et al., 2016).

### Micro-celebrities

One group vital to spreading these counter-discourses is that of micro-celebrities. Senft (2008) defines micro-celebrities as regular people who enhance their popularity through self-branding and strategic self-presentation on social media which creates an image that people can easily absorb. Their followers are their fan base and are bound to them through continuous communication and interaction. By expressing, creating and sharing their identities online, they increase their cultural power and agency (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008).

The concept of micro-celebrity was redefined in Tufekci's (2013) article on online activism during the Arab Spring. She introduced the concept of networked microcelebrity activism, which can be defined as "politically motivated non-institutional actors who use social media to present their political and personal selves to attract public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimonials, advocacy and citizen journalism" (Tufekci, 2013, p. 850). She argues that there are two differences between Senft's (2008) conceptualization of micro-celebrities and her conceptualization of networked micro-celebrity activists. First, the followers are not seen as fans but as political allies, supporters, political opponents and mediators who reach a wider audience such as journalists. Second, networked micro-celebrity activists use their influence not only for their personal

gain but as a resource to further their cause. However, unlike mainstream activists, their influence is not based on institutional affiliation or political party membership but social media status. Their influence and reach are often much more significant than social movements and other organizations. Moreover, traditional media often mention or invite networked micro-celebrity activists because they report on events that are difficult for traditional media to document. These traditional media appearances further elevate the status of the micro-celebrities by attracting more attention and followers on social media.

The interaction between micro-celebrities and traditional media is precisely why this group is essential in spreading alternative discourses. Micro-celebrities tend to produce coherent and unifying discourses for their followers, aggregating what would otherwise be fragmented bits of information circulating on social media. In doing so, they support the political synchronization of media, which is the process by which new and old media come together in producing and disseminating a common, coherent discourse on political events (De Angelis & Badran, 2015). This process allows micro-celebrities to introduce and disseminate alternative discourses that challenge or destabilize the dominant discourse.

However, this does not mean that these alternative discourses are free from criticism. As micro-celebrities have both an international and national following, it becomes more complicated to uphold their influence. For example, international media often invite micro-celebrities to speak on behalf of domestic social movements due to their online popularity. However, because they are not members of these movements, they do not always represent them properly, which results in intense scrutiny by the people who are affiliated with the movement (Tufekci, 2013). Furthermore, social media tends to result in nodocentrism - the tendency of algorithms to favour the most visible users and ignore less visible users. On that note, the argument could be made that micro-celebrities receive more attention than less visible users, and do not reflect a comprehensive and complete representation of society (Mejias, 2009), but because micro-celebrities want to preserve their influence, they tend to post topics their followers favour. Therefore, it is still interesting to focus on micro-celebrities because they disseminate (alternative) discourses to retain their online popularity (Jamal et al., 2015).

## Social media, development and conflict

As described in the introduction, social media's role in development is twofold (Nicholson et al., 2016). On the one hand, it is a tool for development, and on the other hand, it is a source of information for development scholars. In this thesis, development is understood as human development, which focuses on building people's capacities and realizing their economic, environmental, social and political potential. Thus, social media as a development tool refers to how social media can enhance people's ability to improve their livelihood and exercise their civil and political rights. Yet, the way in which social media is currently used for development is not development-oriented in the traditional sense of the word. For example, social media can reduce poverty by empowering users with limited resources to share resources and information and facilitate opportunities for capacity building, collective action and influence. In addition, social media can limit

corruption by allowing users to monitor institutions and improving institutional transparency. Some techno-optimists even argue that social media can overthrow oppressive regimes. However, the same features that enable users to expand their capabilities can also spread hate. Moreover, repressive regimes can use social media as a tool to control and monitor their populations. Even if the techno-optimists are right, many people still do not have access to the Internet and social media, resulting in a digital divide. In short, social media can both facilitate and hinder development (Nicholson et al., 2016).

Lastly, social media functions as an important source of information for develop scholars for several reasons. First, social media allows people from different groups to convey their views relatively safely, as it is easier to express a controversial opinion in the safety of your own home behind your computer than during a conversation in public. Second, in doing so, many politically active people reveal their values, perspectives, and emotions on specific topics, for example, by liking or sharing a post online. Third, social media allows people to comment directly on current events, revealing how people perceive certain phenomena. Suppose a government is looking to introduce a new policy but wants to know how people react to it: all that is required is an online search through social media to get a sense of public opinion. Finally, people worldwide can share their views with a global audience every day through videos or stories that go viral. However, it should be noted that social media does not necessarily reflect public opinion. Even so, social media is still a useful way for people to unpromptedly express and communicate their views. That is why social media offers a valuable insight into people's different attitudes (Jamal et al., 2015).

### Social media, peace and conflict

Social media has become increasingly important not only in the development field but also for peace and conflict scholars. As with development, social media can be used to initiate peace or fuel conflict. In the next section, different theories and concepts surrounding the effect of social media on peace and conflict will be discussed.

#### The logic of connective action

To explain how social media has changed the way people mobilize during a conflict, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) developed the logic of connective action. In the past, almost everyone was a member of a political party or another organization, which mobilized people based on collective identity and in a highly organized manner. This phenomenon is known as the logic of collective action. However, society is much more fragmented and individualized nowadays, and many people no longer identify with a specific political party or organization. Instead, people create a personalized identity based on their personal preferences, which they express via social media by posting, sharing and liking messages. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) realized that social media was not only used by people to spread their personalised identities but also to mobilize themselves based on these personalized identities. Their public engagement was not instigated by membership, an organization, or a leader, but self-motivated. This phenomenon is named the logic of connective action, and characterized by leaderless, informal mobilization initiated through social media that is much larger, faster and more flexible than traditional social movements.

Connective action can significantly impact countries with repressive regimes, as most repressive regimes do not allow their people to organize themselves in political parties or organizations, thereby discouraging collective action. Meanwhile, connective action offers oppressed people the possibility of engaging in public debate and mobilizing themselves against repressive regimes, as social media is harder to control. For example, during the Arab Spring, Arabs revolted en masse after stories of an Egyptian man who was beaten to death by police and a Tunisian man who set himself on fire after being mistreated by regime officials went viral via Facebook. People identified themselves with these stories, demonstrated by Facebook campaigns such as ‘We’re all Khaled Saïd’, resulting in leaderless and informal protests that managed to overthrow repressive regimes (Howard et al., 2011). However, this example also highlights the main disadvantage of connective action: no leader, party, or organization has the legitimacy to speak on behalf of the protesters. As a result, it is more difficult to use the momentum created during the protest as political leverage as there is uncertainty whose to represent the protesters during negotiations (De Angelis & Badran, 2021). Nevertheless, social media still increases people’s agency by allowing them to mobilize themselves through the logic of connective action.

**Crowdsourcing**

Another vital application of social media is crowdsourcing. The idea of crowdsourcing is that every user has unique and diverse talents and knowledge that others may find valuable and that could be employed for collaborative problem-solving. According to Al-Omouh and Yaseen (2016), people use social media crowdsourcing to provide for their humanitarian needs during a conflict. The motivation for people to partake in social media crowdsourcing can be explained

Definition crowdsourcing
<p>“The act of taking a task traditionally performed by a designated agent and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call” (Al-Omouh &amp; Yaseen, 2016, p. 43)</p>

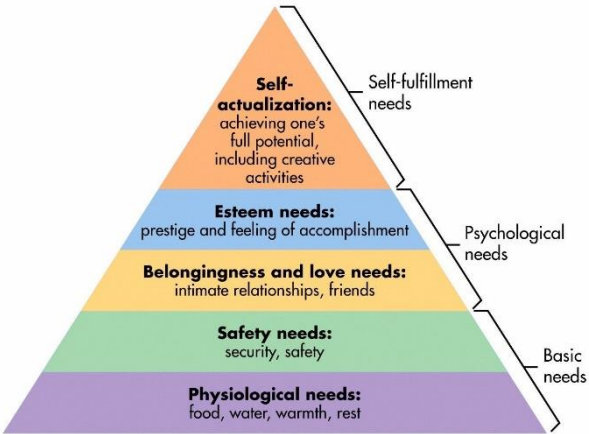


FIGURE 1. MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS (SIMPLY PSYCHOLOGY, 2020)

through Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory (Al-Omouh & Yaseen, 2016). First, social media crowdsourcing is used by people in conflict areas and humanitarian aid organizations to exchange information on physiological needs. Humanitarian aid organizations use social media to determine which areas have been affected and what is needed. Moreover, social media crowdsourcing contributes to finding and collecting information about missing and abducted persons. Second, social media crowdsourcing provides information on emergencies and risks to ensure people’s safety and security. Third, social media crowdsourcing comforts people by showing that others are faced with similar troubles, which generates a sense of community. Fourth, social media crowdsourcing enables citizen journalism, raising people's awareness by directly reporting what happens during a conflict. Finally, social media crowdsourcing supports people in achieving their full potential by fulfilling all the

aforementioned needs.

Tenove (2019) presents another advantage of social media crowdsourcing during a conflict, namely crowdsourced documentation. Crowdsourced documentation enables ordinary people to collect, archive and verify the evidence of war crimes and human rights violations in their country. It also makes it easier to collect evidence in countries that are difficult for formal organizations to access due to government restrictions or safety and security issues. Crowdsourced evidence has increasingly been used during human rights investigations and international criminal prosecutions. Social media crowdsourcing is now also employed to verify and analyse evidence to ensure its authenticity. Finally, crowdsourced documentation enables victims to hold perpetrators accountable and supports the creation of collective memory.

However, while social media crowdsourcing comes with benefits and is able to provide in people's needs during a conflict, it could also put them at risk. Al-Omouh and Yaseen (2016) identified three possible risks of social media crowdsourcing during a conflict. First, repressive regimes can use social media crowdsourcing to track down, threaten, and harass online activists or their relatives. Second, social media crowdsourcing is becoming increasingly popular among terrorists who use it to spread their terrorist ideology and recruit people to join their cause. Finally, even ordinary citizens utilize social media crowdsourcing to spread, instigate, and legitimize hatred, including nationalism, discrimination, and ethnocentrism. Although social media crowdsourcing comes with risks, people will constantly weigh them against the benefits.

### Truth-telling

Best, Long, Etherton, and Smyth (2011) argue that creating a collective memory or shared truth is crucial to establishing sustainable peace. Therefore, it is essential within (post-)conflict societies to support truth-telling activities, as they contribute to national healing and reconciliation. There are two kinds of truth that can be told, the factual truth. Factual truth comprises the official account of the events that happened during a conflict, such as the documentation of human rights abuses. This form of truth reveals past crimes, recognizes the suffering of the victims and enables them to bring perpetrators to justice. Furthermore, it helps to prevent lies and misunderstandings about what happened. On the other hand, personal truth presents itself in the narratives of people involved in the conflict, such as victims and perpetrators. Best et al. (2011) claim that personal truth-telling increases people's self-efficacy, which is a person's confidence in their ability to successfully influence their environment, essential for emotional healing and reconciliation. These personal truths together form a general societal discourse, which creates a shared truth together with the factual truth. These forms of truth-telling are both facilitated by social media. First, factual truth-telling is facilitated by enabling people to share news stories during conflict and to document online posts, photos and videos that can serve as evidence of war crimes. Second, social media fosters personal truth-telling because it allows ordinary people to share their personal stories online.

Though personal truth-telling can reopen old wounds, it is vital to uncover these multiple truths "to enable a transitional society to come to terms with its past in order to understand its present and to be better prepared for its future" (Aboueldahab, 2018, p. 9). However, some personal narratives are omitted from the general societal discourse. Herremans and Destrooper (2021)

distinguish two omissions from personal stories: erasure and invisibility. They define erasure as “a process during which the direct acts and discernible choices of identifiable actors result in a narrowing of [...] narratives by excluding certain voices or topics” (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021, p. 5). Essential within this definition is that the actions of an actor caused the omission. The most apparent form of erasure is when oppressive regimes seek to conceal their crimes by silencing victims. Yet, there is also a more subtle form of erasure in which the well-meant actions and choices of justice actors such as lawyers, civil society organizations, and activists lead to the omission of some voices or topics. Furthermore, Herremans and Destrooper (2021) define invisibilization as “a dynamic whereby certain voices or issues are omitted from public processes of communication and deliberation, but where no specific actor or act can be identified as the cause of that process” (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021, p. 6). In other words, the omission of certain personal narratives is embedded in social systems and structures. The danger of omission is that it render invisible the experiences of many victims, resulting in secondary victimization by not acknowledging their truth. Furthermore, it can lead to selective justice because some criminals are not held accountable for their crimes. Therefore, it is crucial within personal truth-telling that all the different narratives are acknowledged to allow victims to reclaim their narratives.

### Echo chambers

Social media contains a massive amount of information, which could enable people to engage in a more extensive public debate. However, this information overload could also result in people selecting information that reinforces their existing views. This confirmation bias is amplified by social media algorithms that tend to connect like-minded people. Resulting in an echo chamber in which people constantly encounter claims that resemble their own views. This means that their individual beliefs are reinforced because they are less exposed to alternative views. Social media algorithms also tend to adapt the information they show on people’s online feeds to their personal preferences resulting in a filter bubble. Consequently, it is more difficult for people to engage a social discussion because their views become more extreme, and they disregard opposing views. Moreover, their reality is manipulated by the filter bubble, which is difficult for outsiders to break. Especially during a conflict, the echo chamber effect can create deep mistrust between opposing parties, increasing fragmentation within society. Ultimately, this can lead to polarization, which worsens a population's chances of creating lasting peace (De Angelis, 2011).

People’s tendency to categorize people into different groups is not new. Identity and characterization have always played an essential role in social life. Identity can be defined as the self-perception of a group or individual and characterization as how they perceive others. As a result, individuals and groups divide the world into us vs. them. People base their identities on various factors such as race, religion, place and social class and identity serves several purposes, such as providing a sense of self and clarity about one’s role in society and relations to others. Thus, it serves as a social organizing mechanism. However, identities can cause tension and exclusion when people in a group stereotype outsiders and attribute motives to outsiders to elevate themselves. According to Van Dijk (2000), this Us vs Them mentality in which people naturally categorize people into specific groups based on race, religion, place, or social class helps determine where and how they fit into different

social situations. However, it can make people in the same group feel superior, stronger, and better than people outside the group, blaming those outside the group for their problems and even labelling them as enemies. Ultimately, it can hinder social discussions between groups and exacerbate conflict (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck, Gray, & Bryan, 2003).

### Digital repression

While social media could enable oppressed people to mobilize themselves against repressive regimes, social media could also facilitate repressive regimes repressing their people. Digital repression occurs when repressive regimes or their followers target activists and dissidents' online. Moreover, they not only use it to threaten and silence activists and dissidents within the country but also across borders, known as transnational repression. In addition, digital repression is used to discourage activists' and dissidents' involvement in transitional justice efforts. In doing so, repressive regimes have turned social media into instruments of control. Repressive regimes use various digital repression mechanisms to target activists and dissidents, such as hacking, surveillance, intimidation, and counter-messaging. First, repressive regimes often hack into activists' and dissidents' accounts or devices to collect personal information and conversations. Second, they use surveillance to monitor activists' and dissidents' online activity. Third, they intimidate or threaten to harm activists, dissidents, and their family members online if they say or do something the regime does not want them to. Finally, they spread disinformation and propaganda to counter the messages of activists and dissidents and gain the support of outsider allies, as well as flagging activists' and dissidents' online activities to get third-party administrators to remove their pages and content. In short, social media offers repressive regimes new ways to oppress their population (Tenove, 2019).

Even the possible threat of digital repression profoundly affects people's online activities. One such effect is network erosion, when activists and dissidents cut off communication with their relatives, or their family members cut ties with them for fear of retaliation from the repressive regime. Another effect is social sorting, which happens when activists and dissidents disconnect with pro-regime 'friends' on social media because they are afraid that these persons will endanger their safety. The same applies to pro-regime supporters who are 'friends' with activists and dissidents. Although some activists and dissidents are prepared to risk endangering their loved ones or breaking their connection with them, not everyone is. As a result, people censor themselves online to protect their family and friends. However, this self-censorship also extends to offline activities such as anti-regime demonstrations because of fears that "known" activists and dissidents may inadvertently reveal their identities by posting videos or photos of the protest (Moss, 2016).

While some people judge online activism as slacktivism or clicktivism, as it does not need much effort, digital repression demonstrates that it is a vital form of protest. Therefore, states and tech companies should develop techniques to protect online activists against digital repression. Currently, digital repression is still perpetuated by several states and companies that provide repressive tools for repressive regimes to use against activists and dissidents. Social media architecture can also impose restrictions on activists and dissidents, influencing their online activities. For example, anonymity on Facebook is prohibited, which means that activists and dissidents cannot protect themselves against digital repression. However, the same restrictions also apply to repressive

regimes and their supporters. For example, the pages of pro-regime supporters are removed if they post objectionable content. Despite these restrictions, digital repression will remain the dominant form of repression, as it allows repressive regimes to suppress their populations inside and outside the country easily (Moss, 2016).

## Peace vs justice

To better understand micro-celebrities' views on Syria's peace and justice processes, it is essential to understand the various debates surrounding peace and justice. One of the key questions for peace and justice scholars is whether it is better to strive to end the conflict as quickly as possible, at all costs or to bring justice to victims by holding war criminals to account. Williams et al. (2018) described this debate by explaining the three approaches: the peace-first approach, the justice-first approach, and the peace-with-justice approach.

First, the peace-first approach has the primary goal to end conflict above all other interests. In other words, peace is the number one priority, and all other matters and concerns that stand in its way must give way. The primary goal of negotiators is to end violence rather than seek the best possible solution to the conflict or do justice to the victims. The peace-first approach has several benefits, such as saving lives and ending human suffering. Although war crimes have been committed, ending the conflict prevents more from happening. Moreover, ending the conflict ensures that people regain access to medical care and education. Finally, offering amnesty instead of prosecuting criminals promotes reconciliation by restoring normal relations between the divided population. The peace-first approach can be implemented in various ways, such as the cessation of hostilities, through demobilization, demilitarization and reintegration of fighters. Peacekeepers should be deployed to monitor compliance with these agreements, but they should not interfere in other matters, such as political reform or the implementation of human rights and justice mechanisms. Negotiators should only negotiate with those involved in the conflict and not with the rest of society. Moreover, justice is not part of the negotiations, as some parties involved in the peace process committed war crimes. In addition, the negotiating parties have to adjust their terms because not all interests of the conflicting parties can be represented. Finally, it is necessary to grant full or conditional amnesty to allow for negotiations to take place at all. An example of the peace-first approach is the peace process in South Africa, where amnesty was granted to the apartheid government and anti-apartheid parties to facilitate negotiations between them (Gibson, 2006).

Proponents of the justice-first approach, on the other hand, argue that justice is essential for the peace process. They hold that peace cannot be achieved without justice, even if the pursuit of justice prolongs the conflict. In contrast to the peace-first approach, the interests of all actors are represented, not just those of the conflicting parties. The justice-first approach is beneficial because it recognizes the suffering of victims, holds individuals and institutions accountable for war crimes, creates a shared truth, promotes deterrence, and prevents collective guilt<sup>1</sup>. This approach is implemented through justice mechanisms that have jurisdiction over the war criminals, such as referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC), ad hoc tribunals established by the UN, hybrid

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<sup>1</sup> Collective guilt means that an entire group is held accountable for the actions of a few individuals (Williams et al., 2018)



tribunals<sup>2</sup>, national courts and universal jurisdiction<sup>3</sup>. Finally, amnesty is excluded because it runs counter to international law to grant amnesty to war criminals. An example of the justice-first approach is the Rwanda peace process. High-level war criminals were tried in the Rwanda tribunal established by the UN, while, domestic tribunals prosecuted lower-level war criminals. In addition, the traditional Gacaca courts were deployed at the community level (Matgorzata, 2020).

Third, those in favour of the the peace-with-justice approach argues that peace and justice reinforce each other. The question is not whether peace or justice should be pursued but how and in what order they should be implemented. Justice combined with peace plays a restorative rather than a retributive role. Ther are various ways to organize the peace-with-justice approach, including the sequential and holistic method. With the former, justice is pursued after peace is achieved. The latter, on the other hand, involves merging peace and justice by resorting to non-prosecutable accountability measures<sup>4</sup>, which are alternative methods of justice that go beyond legal institutions, creating broader political and social engagement in the peace process.

Furthermore, there are several justice-oriented tools that do more than hold war criminals accountable, such as traditional justice, reparations, and truth-telling. An example of the peace with justice approach is the peace process in Sierra Leone, which combined the prosecution of high-ranking war criminals with broad amnesty for low-level war criminals (Fabricius, 2014).

As described above, each approach has its advantages, so the most suitable approach will differ from one conflict to the next. The most important thing for peacemakers to consider when choosing an approach is how well it fits into the conflict society’s needs and culture. If the society does not support the approach, it will not foster long-lasting peace.

### Lederach’s peace-building gaps

However, even if peacemakers choose an approach that fits society’s needs and culture, there are still some gaps within the peace-building process that they should take into account. Lederach (1997 as described in, Buchanan, 2014a) identified three peace-building gaps that explain why some societies failed to build and maintain long-lasting peace: the interdependence gap, the justice gap, and the process-structure gap (Buchanan, 2014a).

First, the interdependence gap occurs when the peace process only focuses on (re)building horizontal capacity, which means (re)building equal footing relations. One of the most important goals of peacebuilding is (re-)building new and broken

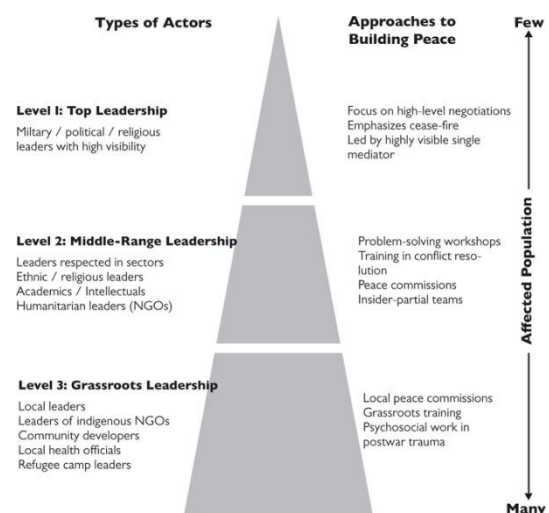


FIGURE 2. LEDERACH'S PEACEBUILDING PYRAMID (BUCHANAN, 2014B)

<sup>2</sup> A mix of international and domestic justice mechanisms, which can be created by the international community, the conflicting parties or both (Williams et al., 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Criminal jurisdiction based solely on the nature of the crime, without regard to where the crime was committed, the nationality of the alleged or convicted perpetrator, the victim, or any other connection to the state exercising such jurisdiction (Bdiwi, 2019)

<sup>4</sup> Examples of non-prosecutorial accountability measures include truth and reconciliation commissions, traditional justice mechanisms, public acknowledgement mechanisms and institutional reforms.

relationships created by or resulting from conflict. Reconciliation often occurs between people on an equal footing, called horizontal capacity, such as politicians signing a peace agreement with other politicians. However, there is a lack of relationships between different levels of society, called vertical capacity, which results in prolonged conflict. Peacemakers are often unaware that peace negotiations should not only include leaders but all levels of society. Lederach argues that peacebuilding is still too focused on building horizontal capacity while completely ignoring vertical capacity. However, to create lasting peace, peacemakers must take into account the interdependence between the different levels of society. These different levels within society are depicted in Figure 2. In short, both horizontal and vertical capacity should be developed simultaneously to lead to lasting peace.

Second, the justice gap, which occurs when the expected peace differs from the real peace. Sometimes, a group of people is subjected to structural violence, which refers to the indirect exploitation and marginalization of people built into social, cultural, and economic institutions. If structural violence is not adequately addressed, people may feel the need to resort to direct violence. However, people quickly realize that direct violence worsens their situation, after which they decide to sign a peace agreement. Yet, peace agreements often only address direct violence without dealing with the injustices of structural violence, creating a gap between the expected peace and the peace that is achieved. Lederach argues that peacemakers should not only focus on reducing direct violence but also on addressing structural violence to achieve lasting peace.

Finally, the process-structure gap, which occurs when peace is seen as a product rather than a process. People often believe that peace is achieved when a peace agreement is signed. However, building lasting peace requires constant efforts to address the injustices that have caused the conflict. In other words, peace is an ongoing process rather than a product. Society should set up a structure that supports the peace process by bringing about the desired change. Lederach argues that peacebuilding is a never-ending process of adapting the social structure to avoid structural violence. In short, peacemakers can only build and maintain lasting peace if they take into account these three gaps in peacebuilding.

### (International) legitimacy

Legitimacy is a crucial concept within conflict and peacebuilding that can be defined as “the assumption or perception that something is right, proper or appropriate according to some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Schoon, 2016, p. 143), “which structure interactions and impose constraints on states and other institutions” (Schoon & Duxbury, 2019, p. 635). However, given that legitimacy is a social construct, what is considered legitimate can vary widely depending on different contexts (Schoon, 2016). Therefore, legitimacy can be regarded as a political concept (Clark, 2007), which actors can employ to advance their political agenda. Especially during conflicts, legitimacy and illegitimacy feature prominently in public discourse, but legitimacy and illegitimacy are also essential in deciding who should be included in peace negotiations (Schoon, 2016; Schoon & Duxbury, 2019).

Even though legitimacy is a widely used concept, there are some issues in analysing it. One

of the main issues is that scholars tend to focus on legitimacy as a process, i.e. how something becomes legitimate or an attribute given to actors or actions. Instead, they should focus on who grants legitimacy because who is considered legitimate can differ depending on which side actors are on during a conflict. Another issue is that people's norms, values or beliefs on which legitimacy is based can vary across cultures, space and time. In other words, legitimacy depends on social contexts. For example, conflicts often arise because people no longer believe in the state's political legitimacy, so they feel compelled to revolt. Thus, legitimacy is what the people believe it is, making it hard to find a universal form of legitimacy and compare legitimacy in different cases. However, there are some ways to overcome the variability of legitimacy. First, while people's definitions of legitimacy can vary widely in social contexts, illegitimacy is easier to identify because people often agree on things they think are wrong. This is also why legitimacy is often described in negative terms in international law. Second, legitimacy only exists if conferred by an actor, which points to the relationality of legitimacy. However, during a conflict, there are multiple actors involved, which all have the ability to confer legitimacy. Therefore, researchers should focus on the entire network of actors to understand the dynamics of a conflict by asking who grants legitimacy and which actors consider them illegitimate. In this way, they provide insight into how different actors use legitimacy to advance their agendas (Schoon, 2016; Schoon & Duxbury, 2019).

Furthermore, legitimacy is also a vital source of power for international institutions. The UN, for instance is seen as the embodiment of the socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions of global society. Their legitimacy gives them the authority to make decisions and forces states to behave differently than they would otherwise. The UN has discursive power, namely "the ability to promote and impose concepts as the basis of preferential policies" (Hurd, 2002, p. 37). Furthermore, their symbols such as objects, phrases, procedures, or manners of speaking possess power that states consider valuable because they transfer legitimacy. Therefore, states often seek approval from the UN to legitimate their actions, such as peacekeeping missions, which is important in international politics. However, not all states consider the UN to be legitimate. For example, those against whom the UN's power is used often seek to delegitimize it. According to scholars, the best way to delegitimize the UN's authority is to claim that they are not true to their own values. Since the power of the UN rests on the legitimacy that states grant it and different states use different criteria to assess the legitimacy of the UN, they must be careful not to misuse it. For example, one of the most important values of the UN is collectivity. Suppose, however, that states believe that the UN is being used to advance the agenda of one of its members. In that case, it loses its legitimacy and must resort to coercion to enforce its authority (Hurd, 2002). Therefore, legitimacy is an important tool for political actors and international organizations to exercise power during conflict or peace negotiations.

### Transitional justice

Furthermore, justice within the peace process is commonly referred to by scholars as transitional justice, which can be defined as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure

accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation” (ICTJ, 2019, p. 5). It aims to rectify mass violations and find ways to address structural causes of violence and repression, which Lederach refers to in his justice gap (Buchanan, 2014a). While criminal accountability is a crucial part of transitional justice, it also addresses the needs of victims and social problems by increasing trust in institutions and between people and groups, strengthening the rule of law and access to justice, and reducing (gender) inequality, marginalization and corruption. Doing so contributes to conflict prevention by combating human rights violations, repression, criminal violence, and the recurrence of a civil war. Therefore, in a ICTJ (2019) report on transitional justice it is argued that sustainable peace and development will be more achievable if societies effectively pursue transitional justice after severe and large-scale human rights violations (ICTJ, 2019).

### Politicization of justice

However, other scholars argue that transitional justice processes are politically charged, especially the decision of who should be prosecuted. According to them, international and domestic actors use it strategically to appease public anger or silence political dissidents without providing meaningful accountability (Aboueldahab, 2017; Massias, 2015). This phenomenon is known as the politicization of justice, which means that transitional justice runs the risk of being distorted by politics. This is a complicated issue to skirt, as transitional justice is also closely connected with politics. After all, there can be no transitional justice without political change. Moreover, transitional justice is also an instrument of democratization by supporting the re-establishment of democratic institutions, human rights and reconciliation.

However, politics could also distort transitional justice for any of three reasons: unilaterality, impunity and impotence. First, unilaterality means that only the losers of the conflict are brought to justice rather than all sides that committed war crimes during the conflict. This involves harnessing transitional justice not only as a tool for political change but also to legitimize victory, which could jeopardize the entire transitional process. Second, impunity, which means that accountability, reparations and truth are sacrificed for national reconciliation through amnesty for war criminals. This approach is the same as that of the peace-first approach. Often the old rulers make impunity a precondition for political change, which is possible because the balance of power remains largely in their favour. However, impunity may foster resentment in society, and the new rulers may revert to their old cruel practices, as they were never punished in the first place. As a result, the conflict could arise again. Third, impotence means that the new government does not have the power or capacity to effectively apply democratic mechanisms and rules. In other words, due to a lack of sufficient state resources or will, or because of the very high number of human rights violations, the new power fails to change them, leading to frustration and a sense of helplessness in society. Therefore, although politics is an essential part of transitional justice, it can also distort transitional justice through unilaterality, impunity, and powerlessness, leading to selective justice (Massias, 2015).

### 3. Regional framework

This chapter first provides some general information about Syria, followed by an account of the status of social media in Syria. Subsequently, the various causes of the Syrian conflict are explained, followed by a description of the peace and justice approach in Syria. Finally, this chapter describes the domestic and international parties participating in the Syrian conflict.

#### General information on Syria

First, this section will provide a brief overview of Syrian history after its independence, followed by general information about Syria. After Syria gained independence from France in 1946, a turbulent period of rapid regime changes followed, which ended in 1963 when the Ba'ath Party, taking its name from the Arabic word for resurrection, took power in Syria pursuing a socialist economic policy. However, this socialist transformation caused social, political and economic unrest that resulted in the migration of high numbers of professionals and workers to other Arab countries, the US, and Europe causing a brain drain. In addition, the Ba'ath Party promoted Arab nationalism and Pan-Arabism, encouraging Arab countries to unite to form one state under one political system. In 1970, Syria came under authoritarian rule when Hafez al-Assad seized power within the Ba'ath Party following radical changes prompted by successive coups and internal power struggles. His authoritarian rule enjoyed some popularity because he pursued policies to achieve national security through military reinforcement, internal stability through economic development and land reform, and because he reclaimed Syrian territory lost to Israel in 1967. Despite his popularity on these topics, there were also cases in which al-Assad's rule led to the oppression of Syrian's rights. In 1982, for example, a Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama was suppressed, resulting in the destruction of Hama and thousands of deaths. Furthermore, the Syrian economy stagnated in the 1980s due to rapid population growth, inflation, regime corruption, smuggling, foreign debt, stifling bureaucracy, limited private sector investment, high military spending, slow industrial development, and failing agriculture which hindered economic growth.

After Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad took some steps towards political reform, such as greater political transparency, government reform, and tackling corruption. However, Syrians seeking liberalization were soon disappointed as Bashar eventually continued his father's authoritarian style of government, as evidenced by the detention of reformist activists in 2001 and a boycott of the opposition in the 2007 elections. Yet, in 2011, these long-suppressed internal tensions and the Arab Spring sparked protests across Syria, which were violently crushed by the regime's deployment of security forces. In addition, they argued that the uprising was the work of foreign-sponsored armed groups. However, when they found out that they could not quell the protests, the regime took steps to appease the opposition by lifting the Syrian emergency law, which has been in place since 1963, and dissolving the Syrian Supreme State Security Court, a special court used to try Syrians accused of defying the government. Unfortunately, these measures were not enough to appease the opposition, which resulted in a civil war (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021e).

The Syrian population is characterized by great diversity in ethnicity and religion. As shown in Figure 3, most of the population consists of Arabs, but Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians and Assyrians,

Syrian Christians, also live in Syria. In addition, as shown in Figure 4, most Syrians are Muslim, of which about 74% are Sunni and 11% Alawite. However, there are also Syrians with a different religion, such as Druze or Christians. In general, neighbourly relations and friendships between members of other religions are common in Syria. Even though men are not prohibited from

Religious affiliation (2000)

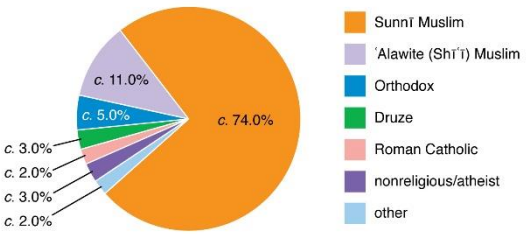


FIGURE 4. RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION (ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, 2021D)

unemployment, which created significant inequality between rural and urban areas resulting in urbanization. This urbanization led to a housing shortage in urbanized areas, exacerbated by young adult males who decided to live independently, contrary to tradition. Despite this urbanization, almost half of Syrians still live in rural areas, as shown in Figure 5. Moreover, Syria's population growth, birth rate,

Syria age breakdown (2018)

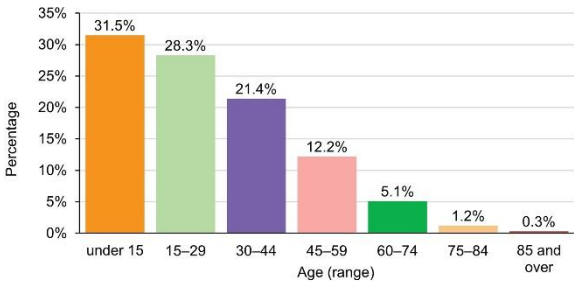


FIGURE 6. AGE BREAKDOWN (ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, 2021A)

and discourage brain drain, it refused to pursue economic liberalization for fear of political instability. The regime controls the primary export sources and sectors such as oil, gas, energy, railways and factories. That is why Syria is receiving aid from China to counter the economic downturn. However, the Syrian Civil War has caused the gross domestic product to decrease, causing economic growth to decline even more. In addition, the Syrian regime regulates the private sector, censors all newspapers, and owns SANA, the official Syrian news agency. These restrictions on journalists have

Ethnic composition (2000)

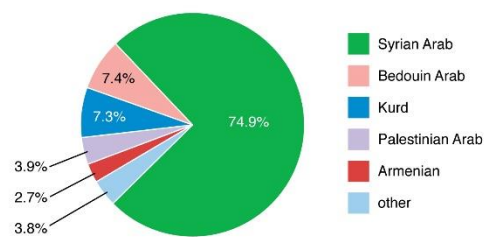


FIGURE 1. ETHNIC COMPOSTION (ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, 2021C)

marrying someone from another religion, Syrians usually marry someone of the same religion. Furthermore, the two largest sectors Syrians work in are tourism and agriculture. Half of the population works in tourism, and a quarter of the population works in agriculture, which are important sources of income. However, the industrialization of agriculture caused

Syria urban-rural (2018)

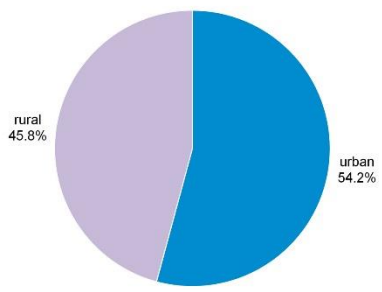


FIGURE 5. DISTRIBUTION URBAN-RURAL (ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA, 2021B)

and life expectancy are high compared to the global average. As a result, Syria has a relatively young population; nearly two-thirds of the population is under the age of 30, as shown in Figure 6. This rapid population growth led to a stagnation of Syria's economy, limiting economic growth. Although the regime made efforts to promote economic growth, fight unemployment

made eyewitness accounts and amateur videos shared via social media all the more important for Syrians to keep up to date with the latest news (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021e).

## Social media in Syria

In 2001 Syria was introduced to the Internet, but access to social media was banned (Rohde et al., 2016). Yet, Syrians circumvented this ban by using VPN services, web-based proxies and other tools. In February 2011, access to Facebook, Blogspot, and YouTube was unblocked. Nowadays, more than 4 out of 5 Syrians have a mobile phone. In addition, the number of internet users in Syria increased from 19,8% to 47% of the total population within almost ten years. Furthermore, more than one-third of Syrians actively use social media. Syria's top 5 most-visited websites are Google, YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia and Blogspot (Kemp & Datareportal, 2020).

As a result, both sides have been using social media frequently. However, social media is not used as a tool that favors one side, but rather as a 'fifth estate' used strategically by both sides during the conflict (De Angelis & Badran, 2015), which means that individuals used social media to express dissenting views (Dutton, 2009). For example, the regime supporters promoted the regime's discourse on social media. However, due to Syria's weak civil society, lack of open political debate and slow internet development, the opposition was unable to create and disseminate alternative discourses that challenged the regime's discourse, resulting in a fragmented online public sphere (De Angelis, 2011).

## Causes of the Syrian conflict

In 2011, the fall of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes sparked a wave of uprisings in the Arab world that came to be known as the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring gave Syrians hope that they could overthrow the regime through peaceful protests. Social media allowed young people to form activist networks, resulting in more and more people joining the protests. However, unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the regime responded to the peaceful demonstrations by violently crushing them, further outraging the Syrian population. For decades, the people, who had been politically oppressed by the regime and intelligence services, making civil society activism and media freedom impossible, decided to stand up against the regime and fight back (Van Dam, 2017).

It could be argued that it is a sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and some Alawite families, but Van Dam (2017) states that the causes are mainly socio-economic. The Syrian Ba'ath Party, led by both Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad, was secular, so they believed in the separation of church and state. Instead, the Ba'ath Party pursued Arab socialism. However, this ideology failed miserably and plunged Syria into a deep economic crisis. As a result, the urban upper middle classes with ties to the regime became increasingly wealthy, while the rural population became poor due to persistent corruption. This economic inequality combined with one of the worst droughts Syria had ever seen caused crop failures and animal deaths, forcing farmers to move en masse to urban areas. In addition, Syria is one of the fastest-growing populations in the Middle East, which, combined with its deteriorating economy, led to high unemployment among young people, prompting to dissatisfaction with the regime. All these causes together caused Syrians to protest against the regime, which violently crushed the protests. However, the regime's response to the protests fueled further



discontent among the population who decided to stand up to the regime and fight back, resulting in one of the most horrific conflicts of the past decades. As a result, about half a million Syrians have been killed, and seven million Syrians have fled (Van Dam, 2017).

## Peace and justice approach in Syria

This section will briefly describe the peace and justice approach adopted in Syria, which will be discussed in more detail in the results chapters. At the outset of the Syrian conflict, it soon became clear that the justice-first approach would not be possible in Syria for two reasons. First, Syria could not be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) because it had not signed the Rome Statute, and second, Russia and China vetoed several attempts to refer Syria to the ICC through the UN Security Council. Moreover, prosecuting criminals through the national courts is also not an option, as these are still under regime control. For this reason, the UN launched peace negotiations in Geneva soon after the start of the Syrian conflict. These negotiations focused on drafting a new constitution, organizing free and fair elections, and establishing a transitional governing body. However, despite the efforts of three UN special envoys to Syria, the Syrian conflict remains unresolved. Therefore, Russia, Turkey and Iran launched a parallel peace process in Astana in 2017. Contrary to the negotiations in Geneva, the Astana trio invited the warring parties to participate in the talks. As a result of the negotiations in Astana, violence decreased, but the regime and its allies continued to violate the ceasefires. In 2016, the situation in Syria turned in favour of the regime with help from Russia and Iran, making it unlikely that senior regime officials will be held accountable in the future (Williams et al., 2018).

While efforts have been made by the opposition, UN, and civil society organizations to include at least some measure of justice in the peace process, their attempts often face roadblocks to come into full effect. For example, the opposition rejects all peace proposals that ensure that the regime remains in power or grants them amnesty. In addition, they want every peace agreement to contain a justice mechanism. On the other side, the regime rejects all peace proposals that include justice mechanisms and focus mainly on bringing 'terrorists' to justice, by which they mean their opponents. Furthermore, the UN General Assembly has established committees to collect, analyse and preserve evidence of war crimes in Syria. Also, several Syrian civil society organizations, such as the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC), document war crimes. Moreover, regime defectors have also contributed to these documentation efforts. For example, a former regime forensic photographer smuggled in more than 55,000 photos of the bodies of detainees tortured or starved to death by the regime. While there is ample evidence to prosecute war criminals, it is impossible to do so through the ICC due to the limitations mentioned above. However, Syrians have found a way to prosecute some war criminals through universal jurisdiction, allowing them to prosecute regime officials who have fled to Europe in Germany, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Spain and Finland. Many of the individuals concerned are low-level regime officials, because high-level regime officials will not flee Syria as long as the regime remains in power. Hence, it is unlikely that Syrians will get justice as long as the regime remains in power (Williams et al., 2018).



## Main belligerents and foreign involvement

### Syrian regime

After a power struggle in the Ba'ath Party, Hafez al-Assad came to power in Syria in 1971. After he died in 2000, he was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad who remains in power to this day. The power of the Assad family is based on three pillars: the Ba'ath party, Alawite minority and the army, which is led by a small inner circle. Only people who have a close relationship with the Al-Assad family are part of this inner circle. During the Syrian conflict, this inner circle became even smaller, consisting mainly of the Al-Assad and Makhlof family, the family of Bashar's mother, plus some oil tycoons and the old guard, confidants of Hafez al-Assad. The most prominent members of the inner circle are Maher al-Assad, Bashar's brother, and Rami Makhlof, Bashar's nephew, who enjoy considerable financial and military influence in Syria. Oil magnates Ayman Jaber and George Haswani also play an essential role in the Syrian regime as they control a large part of the oil in Syria. The old guard is represented by Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, who has recently passed away, and Ali Mamlouk, head of the intelligence services and Sunni Muslim. Finally, the family's women also exert a lot of influence on the Syrian regime, including Anisa Makhlof, Bashar's mother, and Asma al-Assad, Bashar's wife. This inner circle collectively owns nearly all major financial, political, military and media organizations in Syria (Semenov, 2018).

### Different opposition factions

Numerous opposition factions exist in and outside Syria. They can be broadly divided into political and military factions. Although, it is beyond the scope of this study to mention all opposition faction, the most notable opposition factions are outlined below:

#### Different opposition factions

##### Political factions:

**Syrian National Council (SNC):** an exile-based opposition faction seen by the West as the main representative of the opposition (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013)

**National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC):** a non-armed opposition faction that is based in Syria (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012)

##### Military factions:

**Free Syrian Army (FSA):** a Turkish-backed moderate military faction formed by defected Syrian army officers largely considered the official army of the opposition during the Syrian conflict. However, they were not recognized as such by the military factions in Syria because they were based in Turkey instead of Syria and their military position weakened due to declining military support from the West (Hamit & Çağatay Zontur, 2019)

**Jaysh Al-Islam:** a Sunni Islamist opposition faction composed of fifty Damascus-based opposition factions and most active in Eastern Ghouta. It is one of the best-armed opposition factions and has the most potent rebel brigades. It targets the regime, IS and several Kurdish forces, which is why it is backed by Turkey (CISAC, 2019a)

**Ahrar al-Sham:** a Sunni Islamist opposition faction supported by Turkey and Saudi-Arabia, which is active in Northwest Syria. Although it is a moderate military faction that actively fights IS, it has sporadically collaborated with the Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda, both branded as terrorist organizations (Cassman, 2017)

Several micro-celebrities who are mentioned in the discourse analysis are affiliated with one of these opposition factions.

## International interests in the Syrian conflict

Finding a solution to the Syrian conflict has proven to be problematic because it is being fought domestically and internationally. As a result, several countries have allied themselves with the opposition or the regime through political, military or economic support, likely driven by motives of self-interest. This section will outline the different nations involved in the Syrian conflict, as well as specifying which side they support and what interests may be at stake.

### Countries supporting the regime

#### Russia

One of the main allies of the regime is Russia. Through their veto in the UN Security Council and their military support, they have influenced the Syrian conflict in favour of the regime (Deutsche Welle, 2018). Political academics and journalists have identified several reasons for Russia to support the regime. First, Syria is Russia's most important ally in the Middle East, as evidenced by the various Russian military bases in Syria (The Economist, 2012). Second, Russia wants to prevent Chechen, and other terrorists from the North Caucasus who fought for IS in Syria from returning to Russia (Grove & Karouny, 2013). Third, Syria is one of the largest Russian arms buyers, and the Syrian conflict is an excellent way to test and promote Russian weapons (Mirovalev, 2016). Finally, Russia wants to show that it is a superpower by playing the role of peacemaker in the Middle East (Petkova, 2020). Russia set up the Astana talks in cooperation with Turkey and Iran to safeguard these interests (Thepaut, 2020).

#### Iran

Another regime ally is Iran, which supports the regime with financial and military support, such as sending fighters from Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to fight against the military opposition (Deutsche Welle, 2018). The main reason for this support is that Syria is an ally in Iran's axis of resistance to Western hegemony in the Middle East (Manfreda, 2019). By supporting the regime, Iran also wants to thwart its regional rivals, the Gulf States and Israel, which support the military opposition (Deutsche Welle, 2018). Furthermore, Syria is an essential channel for Iran to transport military support to Hezbollah to fight against Israel (Lucas et al., 2018). Finally, Iran wants to expand their religious and cultural influence in Syria by promoting conversion to Twelver Shiism among Syrians in exchange for economic benefits (Vohra, 2021).

### Countries supporting the opposition

#### Turkey

One of the opposition's main allies is Turkey, which provides military support to all non-Kurdish opposition groups (Deutsche Welle, 2018). The main reason for Turkey to get involved in the Syrian conflict is to prevent the Syrian Kurds from gaining independence, which could affect their internal security by strengthening the Turkish-Kurdish insurgency. Moreover, there is significant internal discontent with the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, which makes it beneficial for Turkey to

resolve the Syrian conflict as soon as possible so that they can return to Syria. Finally, Turkey is outraged by the rejection of their EU membership and US support for the Syrian Kurds, which has sparked anti-Western sentiment in Turkey (Tank, 2020).

### The Gulf States

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular, support the opposition with military and financial support. They mainly support Sunni military opposition factions such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham, as Saudi Arabia and Qatar are predominantly Sunni countries. With this support, they hope to replace the regime with a pro-Sunni, anti-Iranian government to counter Iran's attempts to increase its influence in the Middle East (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

### The US

The US's role in the Syrian conflict is quite ambiguous. While the US government has voiced criticism of the Syrian regime, it has been reluctant to take military action against it. For example, the US government has repeatedly indicated that the regime's use of chemical weapons against the population was a red line for them. However, when the regime carried out a large-scale chemical weapons attack on civilians in the Ghouta region in 2013, no retaliatory actions were taken by US government (Ziadeh, 2017). Moreover, the US government has been reluctant to support military opposition factions for fear of the regime being replaced with anti-Western extremists, as has previously been the case in Iraq and Afghanistan (Lund, 2019). Their priority is mainly the destruction of ISIS and other extremist groups, which is why they provided military support for (Kurdish) opposition factions to fight against them (Deutsche Welle, 2018). However, they only helped the opposition political factions, such as the SNC, in their struggle against the regime (Lund, 2019).

### The EU

Like the US, the EU is mainly focused on defeating ISIS, which has perpetrated multiple terrorist attacks in the EU. Additionally, Most EU countries are against the regime and favour the opposition, but only take supportive military actions by aiding opposition factions in their fight against ISIS, rather than the regime. However, most EU countries do offer humanitarian support to Syrians that have been victimized by the regime (Deutsche Welle, 2018). Furthermore, universal jurisdiction cases have been initiated in Germany and France, among others, to hold Syrian war criminals responsible for their war crimes, which will be explained later in the results (Bdiwi, 2019).

### Israel

Israel is mainly an ally of the opposition out of convenience because they have a common enemy, namely Iran and Hezbollah. They want to prevent Iran and Hezbollah forming a military front on Israel's border with Syria. For this reason, Israel provides military support to more minor military opposition factions along the border in their fight against Iranian and Hezbollah militants (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

## 4. Methodology

This study takes a novel approach as social media research in international development studies usually uses quantitative rather than qualitative research methods. For instance, quantitative research can be used in social media studies to measure the economic outcomes of their projects to demonstrate their usefulness. However, taking a qualitative approach would allow researchers to gain more insight into people's needs (Nicholson et al., 2016). By combining an accurate reading of social media messages (such as tweets), the qualitative approach could lead to valuable insights that could complement or enrich findings from previous quantitative studies (O'Callaghan et al., 2014).

Specifically, discourse analysis of social media is hardly applied as a research method in general. However, there are two reasons why social media is well-suited for discourse analysis. First, social media offers various possibilities to specifically target, collect and analyse different aspects of the online discourse. For example, it is possible to collect messages about a specific topic through interpersonal or social search such as hashtags. Second, there is much more social content on social media than in other online texts (Zappavigna, 2012). Furthermore, the Syrian conflict is an excellent case for online discourse analysis as it is the most socially mediated conflict in history (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). All parties involved are making extensive use of online social media platforms to promote their cause and influence the world view of the conflict. Civilian journalists use social media to give a glimpse into the horrors of the Syrian conflict. In turn, regime supporters discredit the videos and messages that citizen journalists post by claiming they are false. The international media tend to use civilian journalists' coverage to cover the Syrian conflict because regime regulations and war threats make it impossible for their journalists to cover the conflict (Karam, 2013).

Finally, Syria is a unique case in the field of peace and transitional justice as it demonstrates, in contrast to the traditional paradigm of transitional justice, that it is possible to hold war criminals criminally liable before a conflict has ended. To this end, they use universal jurisdiction, which offers opportunities for transitional justice in situations where the international community does not proactively intervene in the conflict (Bdiwi, 2019).

Therefore, this study will focus on the research question:

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*"What are the main online discourses of Syrian micro-celebrities on Syrian transitional justice and peace processes? And what can they teach us about the future/next steps of peace and justice in Syria?"*

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The main question is divided into four sub-questions based on the four different cases of Syrian peace and justice processes discussed in this research. The sub-questions are as follows:

1. *What are the main online discourses of Syrian micro-celebrities on the Geneva peace talks?*
2. *What are the main online discourses of Syrian micro-celebrities on the Astana peace talks?*
3. *What are the main online discourses of Syrian micro-celebrities on the Koblenz trial?*
4. *What are the main online discourses of Syrian micro-celebrities on the Islam Alloush trial?*

## Case study

The current study focuses on specific cases as social media contains enormous amounts of data, making it impossible to research all aspects of the transitional peace/ justice process. However, using a case study, it is possible to define the bounds of the research creating a more workable scope for the data collection. In addition, a case study is a suitable research method to gain concrete, contextual and in-depth knowledge about a specific topic, which is essential for discourse analysis. Therefore, this study focuses on four cases representing peace and transitional justice processes in Syria: the Geneva peace talks, the Astana peace talks, the Koblenz trial and the Islam Alloush trial. This choice is based on the peace versus justice debate, which argues that there are different approaches to achieving lasting peace: the peace-first approach that seeks immediate peace at the expense of justice and the justice-first approach that seeks justice at the expense of immediate peace. Which approach works best depends on how well it fits the needs and culture of society (Williams et al., 2018). As such, the first two cases represent the peace-first approach and the last two cases the justice-first approach to research to what extent these approaches fit within Syrian society.

The cases that focus on the peace-first approach are the Geneva and Astana peace talks. These cases reflect the different ways in which the international community tries to achieve lasting peace in Syria. On the one hand, the UN established the Geneva peace talks to draft a new constitution, organise free and fair elections, and create a transitional government. Therefore, they mainly involve political actors in the peace negotiations. However, the peace-first approach does not support their focus on political transition. Since it argues that negotiators should focus on achieving immediate peace rather than on political reform or justice mechanisms (Williams et al., 2018). On the other hand, the Astana peace talks, which the Astana trio has set up to find a military solution. Unlike the peace talks in Geneva, the warring parties in Astana were involved in the peace negotiations, which is recommended within the peace-first approach, as the warring parties have the ability to end the violence (Williams et al., 2018).

The cases that focus on the justice-first approach are the Koblenz and the Islam Alloush trial. Both trials are cases of universal jurisdiction, as it is impossible to prosecute war criminals through the ICC because Syria has not signed the Rome Statute and all attempts to refer it through the UN Security Council are blocked by Russia and China (Bdiwi, 2019). However, the notable distinction between the cases is that the Koblenz trial focuses on the prosecution of regime officials, and the Islam Alloush trial focuses on the prosecution of a member of an opposition faction. Therefore, these cases show that regime officials and opposition members are both held accountable for their crimes (SCM, 2020). By focusing on both trials, it is possible to examine to what extent the discourses surrounding these universal jurisdictional cases are similar or different which will be explained further in the results.

## Critical discourse analysis

Data for this study is collected using critical discourse analysis (CDA), a qualitative approach that critically describes, interprets and explains how language constructs, maintains and legitimizes social

structures. It is built on the premise that people use language as a means of power to maintain or change existing structures. By studying spoken or written texts, scholars can uncover and explain these social structures through the specific context (Mullet, 2018). Therefore, this approach is suitable to answer the research question by revealing the different views on Syrian transitional justice and peace processes.

### Online discourse analysis

This study focuses on Twitter messages (tweets) about the four selected cases. Online discourse analysis has several advantages over offline discourse analysis, one of which is the fact that it allows scholars to analyse people's views of events while they are still occurring. Furthermore, social media creates a relatively safe place for people to express their views instead of the socially accepted answers they might give during face-to-face interviews (Jamal et al., 2015). While Facebook has a considerably higher user count in Syria (Statcounter Global Stats, 2021), it was decided to focus on Twitter in the analysis of this study which has several reasons. First, the process of mapping out micro-celebrities coherently and exhaustively via Facebook is more difficult as most Facebook accounts are private. Moreover, analysing Facebook content is much more time consuming than Twitter content because Facebook posts have no word limit. Lastly, as a microblogging platform, Twitter is more specifically aimed at and better suited for people to express and exchange their views on current events, enabling the differentiation of different online discourses. (Nissen, 2015; Zappavigna, 2012).

### Research population

This study focuses specifically on Syrian micro-celebrities. This population is particularly interesting for research, because they have a high number of followers, which they aim to engage by showing frequent online activity. As a result, they have a notable online presence and regularly express their views on topics that interest their followers. However, it should be noted that Syrian micro-celebrities are not representative of the views of the entire Syrian population as it is not a random sample. Still, their views provide insight into how Syria's transitional justice and peace processes are viewed : micro-celebrities express their views on their own volition, but their opinions are often shared by their fan base - as they want to prevent their online popularity from declining (Jamal et al., 2015).

For this study, the Syrian micro-celebrities have been divided into two groups: the "pro-regime" group, which support al-Assad, and the "pro-opposition" group, which support the Syrian revolution. Some scholars argue that the Syrian online community can be divided into more subgroups: jihadists, Kurds, pro-Assad, and secular/moderate opposition (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). However, jihadists and Kurds were excluded from this study because jihadists' goal is neither justice nor peace, as they strive to establish a caliphate in Iraq and the Levant (Siebert, Von Winterfeldt, & John, 2016). In addition, the Kurds were excluded from the peace processes by Turkey (Deutsche Welle, 2018). Furthermore, all opposition factions are included in the study as not all opposition factions are secular. Although the conflict in Syria is mainly based on socioeconomic differences, the conflict has taken on a sectarian dimension, which the regime is fueling to secure Alawite support (Van Dam, 2017). Therefore, it has been decided to divide the Syrian micro-celebrities into pro-regime and pro-

opposition and exclude the jihadists and Kurdish micro-celebrities, as they are not relevant in answering the main research question of the current study.

## Data collection

This section explains how the data was collected. An initial list of 180 Syrian micro-celebrities was provided by a partner organisation for this thesis, consisting of micro-celebrities already known from previous research and expanded with micro-celebrities who retweeted these micro-celebrities. This list was then narrowed down by several criteria: 1) number of followers (at least 5000 followers), 2) as mentioned before, jihadi and Kurdish micro-celebrities were excluded, 3) micro-celebrities needed to be clearly on the pro-regime or pro-opposition side, as it was essential to show the viewpoints of both sides. Micro-celebrities whose stance was either neutral or unclear were therefore removed, as they did not fit the scope of the current study, 4) lastly, three of the Twitter accounts were deleted by Twitter (likely due to inappropriate content) and therefore unusable for this study.

As a result, 128 micro-celebrities remained, of which 91 in the pro-opposition camp (71%) and 37 pro-regime (29%), showing that the vast majority of micro-celebrities belong to the pro-opposition. An explanation for this unequal distribution is the partner organisation's selection bias, as its main interests lie in how marginalized groups use (social) media to ensure that independent news and information is available to everyone, for example, through citizen journalism. These stories are more commonly found in the pro-opposition group. Another explanation is that pro-regime micro-celebrities are less active on Twitter because they are already represented by the traditional media (De Angelis & Badran, 2015). While this study contains fewer pro-regime micro-celebrities, the sample size of this group is high enough to conduct a credible discourse analysis.

After that, followed the data collection, using Twitter's advanced search to speed up the search process for specific tweets on the chosen transitional justice and peace cases, which required entering the exact word or phrase being searched for and the specific Twitter account. As most micro-celebrities tweet in Arabic, the search terms had to be translated into Arabic, which was done via Google Translate. To account for any possible translation errors, the automated translations were then checked by a native speaking Syrian translator. The translations of the different concepts are shown in the box. These concepts were manually entered one by one for each of the 128 micro-celebrities, along with the specific micro-celebrity's username to show all tweets with that particular concept. In some cases, the micro-celebrities tweeted both in English and Arabic, and both languages were used in the search entries. Subsequently, these tweets were translated using Google Chrome's

### Overview of case concepts and translations

#### The Geneva peace process

- Geneva - جنيف

#### The Astana peace process

- Astana - أستانا

#### The Koblenz trial

- Germany - ألمانيا
- Anwar Raslan - أنور رسلان
- Iyad Al-Gharib - اياد الغريب
- Koblenz - كوبلنز

#### The Islam Alloush trial

- France - فرنسا
- Islam Alloush - اسلام علوش
- Majdi Nehme - مجدي نعمه

"Translate the Page" feature so that all of the interesting tweets about the four cases could be collected into specific Google docs. Tweets were seen as relevant to the current research question when micro-celebrities shared their views on one of the four cases, but tweets sharing links to news articles were not perceived as necessary for the research purposes. Links to the specific Google documents with the collected tweets and the Excel sheet with the micro-celebrities can be found in appendix A.

## Data analysis

This section will systematically explain the data analysis steps. An inductive approach was used for the data analysis, which means that discourses were drawn from the data (tweets). In addition, secondary data such as news, internet-, and scientific articles have been used as a means of triangulation to increase the credibility and validity of research results. By combining theories and methods in the data analysis, the fundamental biases arising from using a single method or a single observer can be countered (Noble & Heale, 2019).

- A separate Google doc has been created for each case, collecting the relevant tweets for these cases. In these Google docs, the pro-opposition and pro-regime tweets were separated.
- In addition, secondary data such as news, internet-, and academic articles were collected on each case to understand the context of that particular case better. Understanding the context is essential for a discourse analysis because otherwise, the researcher will not understand how language gives meaning to a text about a specific case.
- Subsequently, the Google docs on the different cases were examined several times to analyse if there were similarities between the tweets. First, similar tweets were assigned a specific colour to indicate that they belonged to the same theme. Then these similar tweets were re-examined to derive the overarching view. The different views derived from the tweets can be found in appendix B.
- Then, a sample tweet was selected for each view for analysis. A Syrian translator translated these sample tweets to avoid missing certain nuances that are important for the interpretation of the text. For instance, the Syrian translator Was able to recognize certain sayings used in Syriac Arabic that would otherwise have been missed in Google Translate. In addition, some Arabic words have a different meaning in Syriac Arabic, which a Syrian translator can better perceive.
- Finally, each view was explained through secondary data such as news and internet articles, which are described in the results. This step is essential because it reveals the context of the tweet. Subsequently, this explanation was interpreted using the peace, justice and social media theories mentioned in the theoretical framework exposing the underlying discourse, which is described in the discussion. This showed how micro-celebrities convey knowledge, ideas, or experiences through language (Mullet, 2018).



## Limitations of the research method

One of the main limitations of critical discourse analysis is that it is an interpretive and subjective research method. Therefore, a researcher must explain how this subjectivity influenced the research and how he or she tried to prevent it. As mentioned earlier, there may be selection bias in the selection of micro-celebrities by the partner organization. Nevertheless, the expertise of the partner organization ensures that the selection represents the best possible reflection of the Syrian online community. However, it should be noted that the research population does not represent the entire Syrian people. Yet, compiling a sample of online social media activities will inevitably involve some degree of selection bias due to the large amount of online information, which requires pre-determined selection methods, such as searching for predefined Twitter hashtags. In some cases, it is even preferable to exclude certain groups from the study for research purposes (O'Callaghan et al., 2014). In this case, this study aims to gain more insight into what Syrians are saying online about Syrian peace and justice processes and what they teach us about the future of peace and justice in Syria. Therefore, this study focuses on the pro-opposition and pro-regime micro-celebrities to provide a representative picture of the Syrian online community.

Another limitation is that a relatively small number of micro-celebrities have been studied, as collecting and analyzing data manually is a time-consuming process. Therefore, many researchers who conduct online discourse analysis use an algorithm to collect messages faster. However, the disadvantage of using an algorithm is that they are limited in their interpretation, and for example cannot recognize sarcasm in a statement, thus losing the deeper meaning of messages (Jamal et al., 2015). In addition, accurate reading of tweets can provide valuable research insights that complement the results found in larger data sets (O'Callaghan et al., 2014).

Finally, the researcher's biases can influence the interpretation of texts, leading many scholars to believe that critical discourse analysis is not a scientific research method because it is subjective (Hidalgo Tenorio, 2011). To reduce the effects of researcher bias as much as possible, two precautionary measures were taken. First, an inductive approach and triangulation were used to avoid making this study too subjective. To achieve this, the main themes were derived from the tweets and explained using secondary data, which was then interpreted through established theories of peace, justice and social media. In addition, the sample tweets were translated by a Syrian translator so that the meaning would not be lost in the translation because a native speaker is better able to understand the context of the tweets, recognize Syrian sayings and translate Syriac Arabic.

## Positionality as researcher

Even though no field research was conducted, it is still worthwhile to briefly reflect on my positionality as a researcher in light of the adopted research design. At the time of the composition of the research design and throughout the study, I was aware that as someone from the Global North, my perspective on the Syrian conflict might be biased in favour of the opposition. Therefore, despite my best intentions, it is impossible for me to remain neutral regarding the regime's human rights violations. However, I also condemn the use of force by the military opposition during the conflict. This bias likely stems from the Global North's focus on human rights. Yet human rights are based on

the norms and values of a society, making them culturally dependent. Besides, the Global North uses human rights strategically to pursue its interests, intervening in Libya under the guise of protecting human rights to overthrow the regime, while refraining from in Syria because they feared that anti-Western rebels would replace the regime (Thakur, 2013).

Moreover, it was impossible to experience the local Syrian context first-hand, so I had to base my research on social media data and a literature review. Undoubtedly, the fact that I do not completely understand the local Syrian context limits my understanding of life in an authoritarian state. For example, I was not aware of the magnitude of the daily atrocities that Syrians had to endure, and being regularly confronted with explicit stories and footage over an extended period of time made the study emotionally challenging. Moreover, I was unaware of the risks Syrians still face outside of Syria, such as online and physical threats from regime supporters, making it risky for them to support my research (Tenove, 2019).

Finally, the language barrier was clearly a barrier to my position as a researcher, limiting my ability to understand the tweets and making me dependent on a translator. Due to this language barrier, my data collection and analysis took considerably longer than if I had chosen to research tweets in English or Dutch but deliberately chose Arabic because the Syrian conflict is a unique case, as it is the most socially mediated conflict in history.

## 5. Results

This section consists of four separate chapters focusing on a specific Syrian peace and transition justice case. Each chapter comprises an extensive discussion of the particular case followed by an analysis of the different views of the pro-opposition and pro-regime micro-celebrities on these cases. For each view, one tweet is selected that exemplifies all the micro-celebrities who hold this view, which is then analysed based on the context. For this analysis, secondary data such as news, internet and academic articles were used to provide context for the different views, and interpreted in the discussion using peace, transitional justice and social media theories.

### The Geneva peace process

As early as June 30, 2012, Kofi Annan, the first UN Special Envoy for Syria, established the Action Group for Syria, which consisted of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the Secretaries-General of the UN and the Arab League and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Together they created the Geneva Communiqué, a roadmap for Syria's political transition, which suggested establishing a "transitional governing body with full executive powers" (BBC News, 2012; Ki-moon, 2012). Interestingly, no Syrians were present whatsoever during the Geneva I conference.

It was the second UN Special Envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, who decided to include both the opposition and regime parties of Syria in the conference talks. This was no easy task, as it took almost 1,5 years to convince both sides to negotiate, and the road to Geneva II was paved with even more challenges (BBC News, 2014b). First, there were doubts about whether the opposition delegation could adequately represent the entire Syrian opposition side because the only faction that agreed to attend Geneva II was the exile-based Syrian National Council (SNC), which has almost no credibility on the ground (The Economist, 2013). Even the SNC members themselves were divided on attending Geneva II. One third boycotted the vote to attend Geneva II, and only half of the remaining members voted in favour (Afanasieva, 2014; BBC News, 2014b). Furthermore, the main military opposition factions, such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham, strongly rejected Geneva II because they did not want to negotiate with the regime (Al Jazeera, 2014; The Daily Star, 2014). Also, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's invitation to Iran to attend Geneva II was an issue because the SNC threatened to boycott the conference if Iran would attend (Sly & Gearan, 2014; The Times of Israel, 2014). So even before Geneva II started, there were already challenges. The situation did not improve during the Geneva II talks. The Syrian Foreign Minister accused the West of enabling terrorism and the opposition of being traitors. After several days Geneva II ended without achieving tangible results (BBC News, 2014a; Weaver, 2014).

After that, Lakhdar Brahimi resigned as UN Special Envoy for Syria and was succeeded by Staffan de Mistura. In the following year, De Mistura, who also participated in the Astana process (Altug, 2018), met with several key actors in the Syrian conflict and proposed the Four Committees Initiative, in which four committees would address the main issues in the Syrian conflict: 1) security, 2) political issues (election), 3) the military aspect (the fight against "terrorism" and a possible ceasefire), and 4) Syria's reconstruction. The members of these committees were chosen by the

regime and the opposition (Middle East Eye, 2015). The initiative succeeded in something that previous special envoys could not achieve, unifying the opposition in their rejection of the initiative. The opposition refused because the initiative did not guarantee the removal of Assad, which is one of the principles of the revolution (Hanna, 2015). During the Riyadh conference, this unification solidified when the Syrian National Council (SNC), the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC), Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) established the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) to represent them during the Geneva talks. It united the political factions and the military factions to create one unified voice during the Geneva talks (BBC News, 2015).

Even though the opposition factions were unified, it did not make Geneva III any easier, with talks ending after only two days and both sides not being able to be in the same room together. This premature ending was caused by increased fighting in Syria. In 2015 Russia started to back the Syrian army, enabling them to retake much of the opposition-held areas. Russia claimed they were fighting terrorists, but in reality, carried bombings in all areas not under government control making no distinction between areas of terrorists or opposition (Reuters, 2016). Therefore, the HNC decided to leave the talks until the conditions in Syria improved, such as releasing detainees, ending the sieges and enabling humanitarian aid to opposition-held areas. Their decision was met with accusations by the regime side, claiming that the HNC was sabotaging the talks on orders of Turkey and the Gulf states so the talks would fail and their foreign backers would send better weapons (BBC News, 2016a). The International Syria Support Group (ISSG) tried to stop the hostilities to enable the talk's continuation, but the Syrian regime and their allies, Russia and Iran, broke the deal by continuing to bomb opposition-held areas (Irish & Nebehay, 2016; Irish & Strobel, 2016).

With Russia's help, the Syrian regime managed to recapture Aleppo from the opposition, which completely shifted the balance of power in Syria. After the opposition's defeat, Russia and Turkey forged a fragile ceasefire between the regime and the opposition. They created parallel peace talks in co-operation with Iran in Astana, which they claimed were complementary to the Geneva talks but were intended to expand their influence on the political solution for Syria (Collins & Tahhan, 2017). With their newly regained political influence, they convinced De Mistura to include the Moscow and Cairo platforms, favoured by Russia, in the Geneva IV talks, making it harder for the opposition to form a united front. In addition to all these changes, the opposition and the regime still disagreed on what should be the focus of Geneva IV. The opposition wanted to focus on the political transition, meaning the removal of Assad, while the regime wanted to focus on counter-terrorism, meaning their fight against the opposition, making it hard for De Mistura to discuss the goals set out by UN Security Council resolution 2254, such as a new constitution, elections and governance reform. Moreover, both sides were still reluctant to meet face-to-face, but did not walk away from the talks, which was the only achievement of Geneva IV (ARA News, 2017; Irish, Nebehay, & Miles, 2017). From Geneva V until Geneva VIII, both sides remained convinced of their right, resulting in the resignation of De Mistura as UN Special Envoy for Syria (Anadolu Agency, 2017; Mehr News Agency, 2017; Rudaw, 2017; Wintour, 2017).

Eventually, some progress was made during Russia's Syrian Dialogue conference in Sochi,

where the decision was made to create a Constitutional Committee. Yet, the HNC refused to accept that Russia, an ally of the regime, would oversee the Constitutional Committee and proposed that it would be supervised by the UN instead (Odeh, Jalil, & Maghribi, 2019). As a result, the regime sabotaged the Committee's formation by rejecting the rules of procedure, the voting threshold and the civil society members chosen by the UN. Ultimately, the new UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, managed to form the Committee, which consisted of a large body of 150 members, including 50 members from the regime, opposition and civil society. A small body of 45 members emerged from this large body, which would focus on writing a new constitution or amending the old constitution (UN News, 2019). Still, the Constitutional Committee faces a lot of obstacles that could hinder its results:

- Constitutional Committee's obstacles**
1. To accept an article or amendment, it needs to pass the voting threshold of 75% of the 150 committee members, which could create paralysis (Odeh et al., 2019)
  2. As requested by the regime, the Constitutional Committee does not have a specific time limit to achieve its goals which means that they can stretch the process until the 2021 elections so Assad can be re-elected (Moubayed, 2019)
  3. Its decisions are not legally binding under Syrian law because they are not based on a legislative decree by the President or the People Assembly (Odeh et al., 2019)
  4. Its decisions are not legitimized by UN Security Council resolution 2254 because it states that the Constitutional Committee has to be chosen by a transitional governing body which it is not (Hamou, 2019; Odeh et al., 2019)
  5. It does not represent all factions of Syrian society, but only represents the political and military elite which adhere to the interests of external actors (BBC News, 2019; Hamou, 2019)
  6. By negotiating with the regime it legitimizes it, which prevents the prosecution of war criminals (Hamou, 2019)

These obstacles were already visible during the talks because the regime and the opposition could not agree on an agenda without their international partners (Moubayed, 2019). Thus, as such, the aim for a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process proved simply impossible

**Discourse analysis of pro-opposition's tweets**

This section will discuss the seven different themes and views that could be derived from the pro-opposition's tweets about the Geneva peace talks and how they are legitimized and supported by particular framings and discourses. Thirty five pro-opposition micro-celebritites tweeted about the Geneva peace of which more than two out of five micro-celebrities mentioned the first view which was not to negotiate with the regime. An example of this view and the reasoning behind it can be found in the tweet below made by Hothifah, a journalist from Deir Ez-Zor, who tweeted:

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*“#Boycott\_Geneva\_Negotiations  
 Whoever agrees to attend the Geneva conference will be a partner of the Assad forces in their war against every revolutionary sticking to the principles of his revolution.” (Hothifah, 2016)*

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Hothifah criminalizes everybody who decided to attend Geneva III by arguing that they betrayed the principles of the revolution created by the Syrian Islam Council, an umbrella group of moderate Islamic opposition factions (Pierret, 2014). He argues that participating in the Geneva talks implicitly legitimizes the regime by recognizing them as

#### Five principles of the Syrian revolution

1. Overthrowing the Assad regime
2. Dismantling the security agencies
3. Removing all foreign forces from Syria
4. Preserving Syria's unity and national identity
5. Rejecting the sectarian and political quotas (Syrian Islamic Council, 2015)

negotiating partners, which allows the regime to rehabilitate itself by co-deciding on Syria's future. To strengthen his statement, he uses Van Dijk's (2000) Us vs Them mentality by stating that opposition members who agree to attend the Geneva talks will no longer belong to the in-group and become the enemy (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). In other words, either you are with us, or you are against us. According to this view, the opposition delegation should not negotiate with the regime because it validates the regime's legitimacy, which is against the principles of the revolution.

The second view mentioned by almost half of the micro-celebrities showed that they were not only critical of the regime but also the opposition delegation. They had several criticisms on the opposition delegation. An example of this view and the reasoning behind it can be found in the tweet below made by Faisal al-Qassem, a famous tv-presenter for Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, n.d.), who tweeted:

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*"If the Syrian opposition negotiating in Geneva was really representing the Syrian people, they wouldn't have gone to Geneva in the first place. They are poor and overwhelmed, doing whatever others are commanding." (Al-Qassem, 2016)*

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Al-Qassem states that if the opposition delegation had wanted to represent the Syrian people, they should not have gone to the Geneva talks. He means that by participating in Geneva, the opposition delegation has implicitly legitimized the regime as a genuine negotiating partner, making it impossible for them to overthrow the regime. Furthermore, he emphasized the opposition delegation's lack of self-determination by proclaiming that they do whatever others are commanding. With others, he means the countries who provide international support to the opposition delegation, such as the US, the EU and Arab countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Lund, 2019). By framing that the opposition delegation cannot make their own decisions, he demonstrates their incompetence to represent the Syrians. Moreover, by claiming that they do not represent the Syrians, he excludes them from the in-group of Syrians and places them in the out-group of people who adhere to the international supporters' goals (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Thus, by participating in the Geneva talks, the opposition delegation has legitimized the regime, showing their inability to self-determination within the Geneva talks.

One out of five the micro-celebrities cited the third view that criticised Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria from 2014 to 2019 (Altug, 2018). Despite De Mistura's extensive experience as head of UN missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and had more than 30 years of UN experience within

conflict-related areas and humanitarian agencies (UN News, 2014), the opposition did not trust De Mistura to support their interests. The opposition's criticism of De Mistura was summarized by the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC), listed in the following box:

#### Opposition's criticism of De Mistura

1. De Mistura weakened the impact of Geneva by participating in Astana created by the Astana trio (Russia, Turkey, Iran)
2. De Mistura saw the de-escalation zones as a way to achieve long-term stability, but when the regime showed it did not intend to abide by the agreements, he did not change his strategy
3. De Mistura saw forced displacement as a reasonable solution to protect civilians from the regime's attacks rather than condemning these indiscriminate attacks
4. De Mistura paid little or no attention to the issue of detainees
5. De Mistura equated the regime's human rights violations with those of the opposition based on unsubstantiated claims rather than on well-documented reports
6. De Mistura hardly involved civil society organizations in the negotiations (SJAC, 2018)

These critiques of De Mistura were reiterated by the micro-celebrities, for example, Fadi Nasr, a Syrian activist from the city of Aleppo, who tweeted:

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*"De Mistura threatens the people of Idlib of a similar fate to Aleppo if the current negotiations in Geneva fail?! Looks like De Mistura has become an official speaker for #dogtail" (Nasr, 2017)*

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With Aleppo's fate, Nasr means the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, which resulted in the destruction of the city and the forced displacement of Aleppo's inhabitants to the de-escalation zones (Beauchamp, 2016). He emphasized that De Mistura threatened the people of the city Idlib with the same fate by allowing the regime to add a fourth 'basket' on counter-terrorism during Geneva IV, which changed the focus of the talks causing the political transition to no longer be the primary goal (Collins, 2017). Additionally, the regime used counter-terrorism to legitimize their offensive against the opposition in, among others, Idlib since most of the opposition in Syria is currently based there (Martini, 2019). In other words, the regime was implicitly given a license by the UN to continue bombing the opposition as long as they claimed they were fighting 'terrorism'.

For that reason, he accused De Mistura of becoming the official spokesperson for the dog's tail. The dog's tail refers to the proverb "*the tail wags the dog*," which means that a small or unimportant part becomes too important and controls the whole thing (Merriam Webster, n.d.). In 2016, a Russian newspaper published an article comparing Assad to a dog's tail for refusing to abide by a ceasefire agreement Russia had agreed upon at a meeting of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which embarrassed Russia in front of the international community (Syrian Observer, 2016). In this analogy, Russia is the dog, and Assad is the dog's tail. Hence, by allowing the regime to add counter-terrorism as an issue, De Mistura became the official spokesperson for the dog's tail, Assad. His tweet is also in line with the opposition's general criticism by emphasizing that De Mistura believes that de-escalation zones and forced displacement are reasonable solutions to the Syrian

conflict (SJAC, 2018). Moreover, he used Van Dijk's (2000) Us vs Them mentality by accusing De Mistura of favouring the regime and its allies during the Geneva talks (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Hence, this view criticized De Mistura's role as mediator during the Geneva talks by highlighting his bias favouring the regime and its allies.

Nearly a quarter of the micro-celebrities mentioned the fourth view: no lasting peace could be achieved in Syria without transitional justice. For example, Dr Nasser Al-Hariri, who has a degree in medicine from the University of Damascus, tweeted:

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*“The first step towards the political solution, if the international community and Russia want to find a political solution, is forming a transitional governing body that has full executive power as mentioned in the Geneva Declaration and UN Security Council resolution 2254. And implementing the humanitarian articles starting with releasing the detainees and prosecuting war criminals where without transitional justice there is no sustainable peace.” (Al-Hariri, 2019)*

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Al-Hariri emphasized that the only way to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict is to establish a transitional government and implement human rights, such as releasing arbitrarily detained prisoners and prosecuting war criminals. Because, without transitional justice, there is no lasting peace. His statement is confirmed by an ICTJ report, which states that in conflicts where severe and massive human rights violations have been committed, sustainable peace and development will be more attainable if societies effectively pursue justice for those violations (ICTJ, 2019).

Yet, within the transitional justice processes in Syria, criminal accountability is particularly interesting. Until now, most transitional justice processes started after the conflict had ended. However, the war is still ongoing in Syria, which renders the domestic justice system unusable to achieve transitional justice due to its lack of impartiality and independence. Moreover, the UN Security Council could not refer war criminals to the International Criminal Court (ICC) or establish an international tribunal for Syria because the vetoes of Russia and China block these efforts. Furthermore, the ICC has no jurisdiction over war crimes committed in Syria because Syria is not a party to the Rome Statute. That is why Syrians found another way to hold war criminals accountable, namely universal jurisdiction (Bdiwi, 2019). However, universal jurisdiction is only possible when the war criminals visit a country with a universal jurisdiction principle, which means that the most significant war criminals remain unaffected because they will not travel to these countries. Still, the Syrian conflict has influenced international theory on transitional justice by showing that these processes can also be established when the conflict is still ongoing. So far, Al-Hariri still appears to be right in his claim that there can be no lasting peace without transitional justice as it will still be challenging to achieve transitional justice in Syria as long as the regime cannot be held accountable for their war crimes. However, although the main routes to achieve transitional justice were blocked for various reasons, Syrians managed to achieve partial accountability through universal jurisdiction. Yet, the real war criminals remain untouched.

The fifth view mentioned by less than ten per cent of the micro-celebrities was optimistic



about the Geneva talks. For example, George Sabra, a former member of the Syrian National Council (SNC), tweeted:

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*“Dear Dokma: Sochi and Astana are something and Geneva is another completely different thing. Geneva is the field of the international solution under the auspice of the United Nations and according to the UN resolutions. Sochi and Astana were Russian games and ask who attended them.” (Sabra, 2020)*

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While not many micro-celebrities were optimistic about the Geneva talks, he argued that in contrast to the Astana talks, the Geneva talks have international legitimacy, which is widely debated by both the pro-opposition and pro-regime micro-celebrities. International legitimacy is “rooted in a widely shared system of norms, values, and beliefs, which structure interactions and impose constraints on states and other institutions” (Schoon & Duxbury, 2019, p. 635), which institution represents this system better than the United Nations (UN). By setting up the talks in Geneva, the UN indirectly lends its legitimacy to these talks. However, the UN only enjoys this legitimacy if UN members confer it (Hurd, 2002). This is precisely what Russia tried to challenge, by accusing the US of using the UN-sponsored Geneva talks to control the political solution to the Syrian conflict, thus contesting the UN’s legitimacy by stating that it is only a stand-in for one of its members. Furthermore, Russia argued that the US did not abide by the agreed-upon Geneva Communiqué by only including the SNC in the talks, which explains why Sabra is positive about the Geneva talks because he is affiliated with the SNC. Instead, Russia suggested that the Geneva talks should include all opposition factions, so they set up the Astana talks. By doing so, Russia used the UN’s own values of inclusivity to invalidate the SNC’s participation in the Geneva talks and legitimize the inclusion of opposition factions favoured by them within the peace talks (Schoon & Duxbury, 2019). Thus, international legitimacy is essential in peacebuilding, but international actors can also use it to delegitimize the peace talks.

The sixth view mentioned by almost one-third of the micro-celebrities states that the Geneva talks do not consider what is happening on the ground. For example, Radwan Ziadeh, a prominent scholar in human rights (ISPU, 2020), tweeted:

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*“The meetings of Geneva since it began in 2012, did not lead to anything that has an effect on the ground in Syria. All the political events that had a reflection on the ground took place outside Geneva, and most importantly, the international, regional, and local parties preferred to change the situation by changing the reality on the ground.” (Ziadeh, 2020)*

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He argued that the Geneva talks did not affect the developments on the ground, which had several reasons. First, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the opposition has struggled to organize itself as a united opposition. For example, the exile-based SNC had no connection at all with the demonstrators in Syria. Second, neither the regime nor the opposition was involved in the drafting of the Geneva Communiqué. The regime even actively opposed its implementation by crushing the protests even harder. Third, the US and UN were unwilling to use military action against the regime,

which reduced their ability to exercise power over the parties involved in the conflict. Instead, the US was interested in eliminating ISIL. Fourth, the lack of military action by the US and UN created a power vacuum, and, as a result, in September 2015, military developments in Syria began to shift in favour of the regime due to Russian military support. Additionally, each opposition faction was supported by different international supporters who had conflicting interests that made it impossible to reach an agreement (Ziadeh, 2017). With the lack of unity of the opposition, the lack of involvement of Syrians in the drafting of the Geneva communiqué and the presence or absence of military support to the conflicting parties, the Geneva talks have not yielded any tangible results in Syria.

The last view cited by roughly two out of five of micro-celebrities claims that the negotiations in Geneva are between the international community rather than the Syrians. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Samer Al-Saleh, a senior official in the Jaish al-Izza rebel faction (Reuters, 2019), tweeted:

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*“The war will not end and the Assad regime will not fall until the concerns, fears, and interests of all the countries that supported and participated in this war end.*

*Not Geneva decisions, nor Astana, nor the constitution, nor anything you see in the media.*

*Neither the opposition nor the regime was left with the slightest elements of decision-making.”*

*(Al-Saleh, 2020)*

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He argues that the Syrian peace talks between the regime and the opposition will not lead to a solution until all interests of international supporters have been reached. As described in the regional framework, these interests are contradictory, making it unlikely to find a solution (Deutsche Welle, 2018). Furthermore, both sides are forced to act in favour of the interests of their international supporters or risk losing their support (Lund, 2019). However, the international community insists that the Syrian peace talks are a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process (France 24, 2018). Yet, the Syrians know they have no self-determination in the Syrian peace talks, evidenced by the number of micro-celebrities who share this view. According to this view, the priority of the Syrian peace talks is not to achieve the interests of Syrians but only to achieve the interests of their international supporters.

### Discourse analysis of pro-regime’s tweets

This section will discuss the two themes and views derived from the pro-regime tweets about the Geneva peace talks and how they are legitimized and supported by specific framings and discourses. A total of seven pro-regime micro-celebrities tweeted about the Geneva peace talks of which more than half of the micro-celebrities mentioned the first theme which is anti-US and anti-Western sentiment. For example, Ahmad al-Issa, a professor of English literature at Tishreen University in Latakia, tweeted:

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*"I do not trust #Geneva II. I do not trust #USA. I do not trust #Europe. I do not trust the #Arabs. I do not trust #UN."* (Al-Issa, 2014)

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Anti-Western sentiment, specifically, anti-Americanism is a common theme in discourses throughout the Arab world. In general, there are two schools of thought in anti-Americanism. First, it is based on the aversion of Arabs and Muslims to Western and liberal values, which is called social anti-Americanism. Second, it is based on the negative attitude towards US foreign policy in the Arab world, which is called political anti-Americanism (Jamal et al., 2015).

Research by Jamal et al. (2015) shows that most Arabs mention political anti-Americanism such as the spread of US values abroad, the war against terror and US foreign economic policy. They focused on several events, including the attitudes towards the US of pro-regime and pro-opposition supporters during the Syrian conflict. Most of the negative tweets about the US came from the pro-regime side, which is not unusual as the US opposes the regime. However, even opposition supporters were, for the most part, pessimistic about the US, which was exacerbated by the US's lack of intervention following the regime's chemical weapons attack.

Yet, resentment against foreign countries is not unique to the US but rather general resistance to intervention and influence by powerful states with different cultural values and political interests, such as resistance to Iranian influence (Jamal et al., 2015). Another explanation for anti-Americanism could be fear, especially the fear of US foreign actions against, in this case, Syria, which arose due to Bush's use of Van Dijk's (2000) Us vs Them mentality. He viewed his Christian beliefs as Absolute Good and Islam as Absolute Evil (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Hence his use of expressions such as "Axis of Evil", implying that some countries were downright evil without paying attention to their different beliefs (Solomon & Swart, 2010). As a result, both pro-opposition and pro-regime micro-celebrities promote political anti-Americanism out of fear and resistance towards US intervention created by the Bush administration's dichotomy of the Good West and the Evil Middle East.

However, ironically, the regime uses the US's war on terror discourse to legitimize its excessive force against the opposition and delegitimize its participation in the Syrian peace talks, which is portrayed in the second view cited by more than half of micro-celebrities. For example, Fares Shehabi, a vital business leader and 'independent' member of parliament from Aleppo (BBC World News, 2018), tweeted:

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*"The opposition delegation should have been arrested in Geneva if there were a real United Nations and just international law for its obvious direct support for many years to known terrorist organizations that have been listed on the terrorist lists by the United Nations itself."*  
(Shehabi, 2019b)

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By calling the UN to account for their hypocrisy concerning their definition of terrorists, Shehabi tried to delegitimize the opposition delegation. Martini (2019) argued that the regime's deliberate strategy

to portray the opposition as terrorists is facilitated by the international community's definition of terrorism as "a type of violence perpetrated by "Islamic-inspired" non-state groups" (Martini, 2019, p. 728). Many of the opposition military factions affiliated with the HNC were Islam-inspired non-state groups such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham, which have also occasionally cooperated with the Al-Nusra Front, a group on the UN's list of designated terrorist organizations (Cassman, 2017; CISAC, 2019a). Although, the international community often labels these military factions as moderate. Yet, the UN's definition of terrorism legitimizes the regime's labelling of these military factions as terrorists, making it difficult for the international community to support them because they pledged to wage war on terror (Martini, 2019). Thus, despite its aversion to the war on terror discourse, the regime uses this discourse to invalidate the opposition and legitimize their violence against the opposition.

## The Astana peace process

On January 23, 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran (Astana trio) initiated the Astana peace process to find a military solution to the Syrian conflict. This was not the first time that Syrians convened in Astana: in 2015, opposition factions already gathered in Astana to find a way forward for the Syrian peace talks (Orazgaliyeva, 2015a, 2015b). However, the situation in Syria changed due to Aleppo's recapture by the regime with the help of Russia and Iran, which forced the opposition back to Astana. In addition to the Astana peace talks, the Astana trio also called for a nationwide ceasefire to create mutual trust at the beginning of the negotiations (BBC News, 2016b).

There are several reasons that the Astana trio established a complementary peace process to the Geneva process, which are explained in the section on international interests in the Syrian conflict. For these reasons, the Gulf states, the EU and the US were initially excluded from Astana (Wintour, 2016).

Another difference with the Geneva talks was that the opposition delegation mainly consisted of military opposition factions instead of exile-based political factions. As a result, the focus of the Syrian peace talks shifted from a political to a military solution, known as the 'Astana-isation' of the Syrian peace talks. However, the Astana trio persisted that the Astana talks were not intended to replace the Geneva talks but complement them (Doucet, 2017).

Despite their focus on a military solution, the Astana talks seemed to reduce the number of Syrian casualties due to short-term ceasefires and the establishment of the four "de-escalation zones". These are zones where displaced Syrians could voluntarily move to in the northern province of Idlib, the central province of Homs, the Eastern Ghouta region outside Damascus, and southern Syria along the Jordanian border. However, other than reducing casualties, the fifteen rounds of Astana did not seem to yield significant results in bringing about lasting peace (Barnard & Gladstone, 2017).

Some opposition factions even state that Astana is a political power play by Russia to control the political outcome by ensuring that Assad stays in power (Thepaut, 2020). They claimed that the regime and its allies used the ceasefires to regroup their forces to retake more territory (Daily Sabah, 2017). Moreover, the "de-escalations zones" left too many loopholes for the regime to bomb the opposition by claiming to fight terrorism (Barnard & Gladstone, 2017), which is reinforced by the apparent increase in bombing before and during the Astana talks (Ersan, 2017).

### Discourse analysis of pro-opposition tweets

This section will discuss the four different themes and views derived from the pro-opposition's tweets about the Astana peace talks and how they are legitimized and supported by specific framings and discourses. Twenty nine pro-opposition micro-celebrities tweeted about the Astana peace talks of which more than half of the pro-opposition micro-celebrities mentioned the first view, which criticized the opposition delegation. They criticized the naivety of the opposition delegation and questioned why they were going to Astana at all. For example, George Sabra, a former member of SNC who was optimistic about the Geneva talks, tweeted:

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*“Why do those Syrians go to Astana (Nur-Sultan) and Sochi? Is it to hear the final statement and to repeat false, illusionistic comments and statements about the progress of some files? They can do that from where they are, without taking the burden of travel in their try to beautify the reality and deceive the Syrians.” (Sabra, 2019)*

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With ‘those Syrians’, Sabra refers to the opposition delegation consisting of military opposition factions such as Jaysh al Islam, Ahrar al-Sham and the FSA (Al Jazeera, 2017). Sabra’s affiliation to the SNC explains why he does not favour the opposition delegation because they are mainly backed by the West, which was initially excluded from the Astana talks. Therefore, he sarcastically emphasized that the opposition delegation is fooled by the Astana trio that they are achieving some result while having no power within the Astana process.

According to the SNC, they no longer adhere to the SNC’s principles of the revolution, which are mentioned in the box. Hence, by participating in Astana, the opposition delegation legitimized Russia’s intention to keep Assad in power, preventing the regime’s overthrow (The New Arab, 2018). Yet, not every opposition faction agreed with these principles. For example, military factions such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Islam wanted to replace the regime with a

#### SNC’s principles of the revolution

1. Preserving Syria’s national sovereignty
2. Maintaining Syria’s territorial integrity
3. Preserving the unity of the Syrian people
4. Overthrowing the regime, dismantling its security apparatus and holding war criminals accountable
5. Establishing a democratic, pluralistic Syria (SNC, 2012)

government based on Islamic principles, which conflicted with the SNC’s principle of establishing a democratic, pluralistic Syria (Cassman, 2017; CISAC, 2019a; SNC, 2012). Even though both factions claimed to represent the interests of the Syrian people, they only represented the interests of their faction. Nonetheless, they used it to legitimize their participation in the Syrian peace talks. So the opposition delegation was criticized for participating in Astana because it hindered the realization of the SNC’s principles.

More than half of the micro-celebrities mentioned the second view about how Astana does not serve the interests of the Syrians and that it only supports the Astana trio’s interests. They are convinced that the only reason the Astana talks were initiated was to ensure the Astana trio’s interests, which is discussed in the section on international interests in the Syrian conflict. Still, the Astana trio persisted that Astana was complementary to Geneva (Doucet, 2017) and that it was Syrian-led and Syrian-owned. For example, Lieutenant colonel Samer Al-Saleh, a senior official in the Jaish al-Izza opposition faction (Reuters, 2019), who tweeted:

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*“#Astana is not for Syrians.*

*Astana is not a place for Syrians and revolutionists.*

*It's a place that supports the interests of those countries and it does not help any Syrian. It supports the interest of the revolutionists who claim to be Syrians. And they are on the same page of disorder.” (Al-Saleh, 2019)*

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Al-Saleh described the opposition delegation as revolutionists who claim to be Syrians because he is affiliated to Jaish al-Izza, a military faction active in northwest Syria (Afanasieva, 2015), which opposes the Astana talks. Jaish al-Izza believe that the Astana talks are a Russian ploy to trick the military opposition into a ceasefire because the regime and its allies continue to breach the armistice to retake the opposition-held areas (Zaman al-Wasl, 2019). Hence, according to Jaish al-Izza, the opposition delegation is betraying the interests of the military factions by participating in the Astana talks, which weakened their military offensive against the regime and its allies. Yet, if they refused to go, it would be more difficult for the regime and its partners to legitimize their offensive. Therefore, they are not real Syrians in the eyes of Jaish al-Izza, which excludes them from the in-group of Syrians and places them in the out-group of people who legitimize the goals of the Astana trio (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Moreover, Al-Izza also stressed that Astana is not a peace process and only supports the interests of the Astana trio, who indirectly decide the fate of the Syrian people by negotiating on their behalf without protecting their interests. According to this view, Astana does not help the Syrian cause but instead supports the Astana trio's agenda. Moreover, by participating in Astana, the opposition delegation legitimized these interests.

While most of the online criticism of the Astana talks has been aimed towards Russia and Iran using Astana to achieve their own interests, roughly a third of pro-opposition micro-celebrities also voices a clear anti-Turkey stance, which is the third view. However, it is interesting that pro-opposition micro-celebrities criticize Turkey because Turkey is the main ally of the opposition factions. Yet, Hayvi Bouzo<sup>5</sup>, a Syrian-born American journalist of Kurdish descent (Bouzo, n.d.), tweeted:

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*“Erdogan played dirty in Syria since the beginning. Supported Islamists and was always closer to Iran and Russia than he was to the US, on Syria. Especially considering that Turkey is supposed to be an ally of the US. Sochi and Astana are the biggest examples of this alliance.” (Bouzo, 2020)*

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Bouzo accuses Erdogan of supporting Islamists, with which she means that Turkey mainly supports Sunni Islamist opposition factions such as Jaysh al-Islam, as well as claiming that Turkey has betrayed its alliance with the US by establishing Astana in collaboration with Russia and Iran. She rightly points

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<sup>5</sup> Not all anti-Turkish micro-celebrities are Kurdish Syrians. Besides that, most Kurdish micro-celebrities have been removed from the micro-celebrities list due to methodological reasons, so it cannot be verified. However, her positionality as an author can be called into question due to her Kurdish descent and the fact that she lives in the US.

out that Turkey's participation in Astana can be seen as a move to break its alliance with the US due to its support for the Kurdish PYD. Again, Van Dijk's (2000) Us vs Them mentality is applied by categorizing Turkey as bad guys and the US as good (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Consequently, this view states that Turkey also had an ulterior motive for establishing Astana.

Yet, one out of ten pro-opposition micro-celebrities were positive about the Astana talks and the Turkish involvement, which is the last view. For example, Yasser Abdel-Rahim, a former major in the Turkish-backed Al-Sham corps (SOHR, 2019) who is a member of the HNC and spokesperson for the opposition during Astana, tweeted:

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*“Our primary goal was to protect our people in the liberated areas first, especially after the fall of major areas such as Aleppo. To preserve our revolution and to overthrow the regime. That's why we got into the Astana negotiation under the auspices of Turkey and completed it with the Sochi conference with Tayyip Erdoğan's personal intervention to preserve the safety and security of the civilians.” (Abdel-Rahim, 2018)*

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Abdel-Rahim explains that he entered the Astana talks to protect his people in the de-escalation zones, preserve the revolution, and overthrow the regime. The words he used to describe Astana, such as protect, safety, security, and preserve, are entirely different from those generally used by pro-opposition micro-celebrities. These words imply that Astana protected the opposition factions from harm, danger, risk, injury, and threat in the de-escalation zones. Besides, he states that Turkey was responsible for making all of this possible, which is not surprising, considering that he is affiliated with a Turkish-backed opposition faction. However, interestingly, when he wrote his tweet, there were already ten rounds of Astana talks with no apparent result regarding the reasons mentioned above for entering the Astana talks. Therefore, this view is positive about the Astana talks and the Turkish involvement in Syria. However, it should be noted that this view is mainly mentioned by micro-celebrities who are affiliated with Turkey or the opposition delegation.

### Discourse analysis of pro-regime tweets

This section will discuss the two different themes and views that could be derived from the pro-regime tweets about the Astana peace talks and how they are legitimized and supported by particular framings and discourses. A total of five pro-regime micro-celebrities tweeted about the Astana talks of which four out of five micro-celebrities mentioned the first view which states that the Astana process is suitable to replace the Geneva process and has achieved positive results. For example, Omar Rahmon, a National Reconciliation Centre member affiliated with the regime and Russia (Al-Khateb, 2020), tweeted:



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*“The political solution in Syria will be based on military developments where the Astana conference came as a replacement for the Geneva conference. And it is the gateway to expelling terrorism from most of the Syrian land and return the regime to most areas. The beginning will be according to this arrangement; military in the field and politics in Astana and Sochi.” (Rahmon, 2021b)*

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Rahmon stated that the political solution for the Syrian conflict is determined by the military developments in Syria instead of the political agreements agreed upon in Geneva. Therefore the Astana trio incorporated the military factions in the talks instead of the exile-based political factions (Doucet, 2017). Astana also supported the regime by removing all terrorists from Syria and recapturing all areas under rebel control. Yet, by terrorists, he means anyone who is against the regime, in other words, the opposition factions. By labelling them as terrorists, he legitimizes the violence used by the regime and its allies against the opposition factions.

This 'terrorist' discourse is a recurring theme mentioned by four out of five pro-regime micro-celebrities, which is the second view. However, these two views are intertwined, as seen in Ramon's tweet and the following tweet, therefore they will be discussed together. Similarly, Fares Shehabi, an important business leader and 'independent' member of parliament from Aleppo (BBC World News, 2018), tweeted:

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*“The most important results of implementing the Astana agreements by force are liberating the most important cities and towns of terrorism and re-opening the international highway, Aleppo international airport, rescuing three Syrian governorates from direct threatening, and breaking the Turkish influence in its most important areas.” (Shehabi, 2019a)*

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Shehabi listed all the actual results that Astana has achieved, but romanticized these results. For example, liberating cities of terrorism means eliminating all opposition factions (Barnard & Gladstone, 2017). Moreover, rescuing governorates from direct threatening means besieging and bombing them until all opposition factions die, flee or surrender (Van Dam, 2017). Shehabi also described the recapture of opposition-held areas by the regime and its allies as liberating, while at the same time declaring that by retaking them, they broke the Turkish influence. In short, he pretends that the Astana agreements had achieved peace when in reality, they allowed the regime and its allies to destroy the opposition groups under the guise of counter-terrorism.

Some opposition members even claimed that the regime had been planning all along to radicalize the initially peaceful revolution. Because at the start of the revolution, the regime released all radical Islamists from prison as an "appeasing" gesture, but instead, it militarized the uprising (Van Dam, 2017). Moreover, most opposition factions fight against these radical Islamist groups such as IS because they aim to destroy the Syrian state, which contradicts the aim of moderate Islamist factions such as Jaysh al-Islam, who want to replace the regime with a Sunni theocracy. However, occasionally, they fight with these radical Islamist groups against the regime (Cassman, 2017; CISAC, 2019a).

Pro-regime micro-celebrities also rely on the terrorism view to justify their violence against the opposition factions and delegitimize the participation of the opposition delegation in the Astana talks. For example, Ahmad al-Issa, a professor of English literature at Tishreen University in Latakia, tweeted:

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*“#Syria: The terrorist who abducted women and put them in cages and paraded them publicly and humiliated them are now in #Astana . SHAME!” (Al-Issa, 2017)*

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With the terrorist, Al-Issa refers to Mohammed Alloush, the head of the opposition delegation and the political leader of Jaysh Al-Islam (BBC News, 2017). They are suspected of endangering civilians, including women, by placing them in metal cages throughout Eastern Ghouta to deter indiscriminate regime attacks (HRW, 2020). By branding them as terrorists who kidnap women, he aims to spark anger about attacking innocent victims, which he uses to delegitimize their participation in the Astana talks. However, his logic seems to be based on a double standard: if these alleged crimes were to invalidate the opposition's involvement in the Astana talks, the regime and its allies would have to be delegitimized for all their bombings, sieges, and forced arrests of the Syrian people.

In short, these views claimed that the Astana talks achieved significant results and should replace the Geneva talks as the primary peace process, as well as portray the opposition as terrorists, which they use to justify their violence against the opposition factions and delegitimize the opposition delegation's participation in the Astana talks.

## The Koblenz trial

On April 23, 2020, the trial against two former intelligence officers of the regime started in Koblenz, Germany. It is the first trial anywhere against regime officials, as the UN Security Council could not refer war criminals to the International Criminal Court (ICC) or establish an international tribunal for Syria as Russia and China vetoed these efforts. Furthermore, the ICC has no jurisdiction over war crimes committed in Syria because Syria is not a party to the Rome Statute. For this reason Syrians found another way to hold war criminals accountable, namely universal jurisdiction (Bdiwi, 2019). As a result, Anwar Raslan, the former head of Al-Khatib prison, and Iyad Al-Gharib, a sergeant in charge of arresting opposition members and delivering them to Al-Khatib prison, could be prosecuted in Germany (Wischgoll, 2020). As the former head of Al-Khatib prison, Anwar Raslan is charged with 58 murders, torture of at least 4,000 of his detainees, and two instances of sexual abuse. In addition, Iyad Al-Gharib has already been sentenced to 4,5 years in prison for aiding and abetting the torture of 30 detainees (ECCHR, 2021). However, both Anwar Raslan and Iyad Al-Gharib were relatively low-level regime officials and defected from the regime as early as 2012. Anwar Raslan was even part of the opposition delegation to Geneva, and Iyad Al-Gharib has fought with the military opposition against the regime in Deir Ez-Zor (BBC News, 2021; El-Hitami, 2020a). However, the ‘real’ war criminals can only be tried if arrested in a country with universal jurisdiction. So they will never travel to a country with universal jurisdiction. As a result, only the low-level regime officials will be held accountable while the high-profile war criminals go free.

### Discourse analysis of pro-opposition tweets

This section will discuss the three different themes and views that could be derived from the pro-opposition's tweets about the Koblenz trial and how they are legitimized and supported by specific framings and discourses. Twenty three pro-opposition micro-celebrities tweeted about the Koblenz trial of which two of the five micro-celebrities expressed the first view, which argues that the Koblenz trial is a start to holding the regime accountable. For example, Muhydin Lazikani, a Syrian intellectual and the chief editor for Al-HodHod, an online newspaper, tweeted:

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*“Anwar Raslan, a Syrian intelligence officer, showed up in the German court today. Accused of crimes of torture, murder, and rape. A trial of another informant named Iyad is ongoing at the same time. Hoping that those trials would be the start of others for the criminals in Europe now and in Syria soon. Where justice will be served no matter how long it might take” (Lazikani, 2020)*

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Although the Koblenz trial only tried low-level officials, it laid the foundation for prosecuting high-level officials by demonstrating the bureaucratic nature of torture and killing through witnesses and evidence. For example, the testimony of an anonymous Syrian government official about the existence of mass graves (El-Hitami, 2020b) and the photos of more than 50,000 severely tortured people who died in regime detention smuggled out of Syria by a forensic photographer nicknamed Caesar (HRW, 2018). Both examples demonstrate the widespread and systematic nature of the crimes committed,

which is necessary to define them as crimes against humanity. By effectively bringing regime officials to justice for their crimes, the trial also acknowledged the suffering of the former Syrian detainees (Doumit, 2020; Herremans & Destrooper, 2021). In short, this view argued that the Koblenz trial was the beginning of holding the regime accountable by demonstrating the bureaucratic nature of the crimes.

The second view mentioned by about a quarter of micro-celebrities argues that the Koblenz trial is a case of selective justice that will ensure that regime officials will no longer defect. For example, Wael Abdulaziz, a media activist affiliated with the FSA, tweeted:

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*“As one of the victims of Al-Assad’s slaughterhouses. I stand against the trial of Iyad Al-Gharib and against arresting Majdi Nehme and against punishing the dissidents without a comprehensive justice path which begins with the trial of the regime’s symbols and its criminals. Those procedures that have been worked at by those who call themselves “civil-society activists” are selective, tampering with the human rights file and distorting its content and objectives” (Abdulaziz, 2021a)*

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Abdulaziz highlights a fascinating point currently being discussed on social media among Syrians who support the opposition, namely whether or not it is fair that Raslan, Al-Gharib and Nehme are being prosecuted for their crimes. On the one hand, Syrians argue that prosecuting defectors discourages future desertions because those who defected and fled will be held accountable, while those in Syria can continue committing war crimes with impunity. On the other hand, Syrians argue that the war crimes committed are so severe that there are no extenuating circumstances to justify these crimes. Raslan, Al-Gharib and Nehme should be prosecuted. Yet, low-level war criminals have been granted amnesty for their crimes in other transitional justice cases, as in Sierra Leone's case (SJAC, 2020).

Which raises the question: what determines who deserves to be tried and who deserves amnesty? The answer can be found by examining the construction of the victims’ justice narratives, which can be described as “the expressive function of justice processes about what is considered a crime, and what is considered (un)acceptable injustice” (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021, pp. 1-2). In some cases, certain voices or topics are intentionally or unintentionally omitted from the justice narratives. In the case of Syria, the regime, the West, and civil society organisations function as contributing actors to the justice narratives, but all three tend to leave out or ignore certain voices or issues (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021). It are the latter two that are particularly important for explaining this part of the discourse. Starting with the West, Doumit's (2020) study shows that more than half of universal jurisdiction cases focus on ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra. This can be explained by the West's focus on prosecuting terrorists, which is more in line with their justice, namely the war on terror. As a result, they prosecute relatively few regime officials. As for the civil society organizations, the decision on which criminals will and will not be prosecuted is mostly pragmatical. As described by Herremans and Destrooper (2021), civil society organizations usually only choose to go to trial if they are sure that it will lead to a conviction, due to judicial restrictions within the international law. This, in turn, can leave victims to feel there is only selective justice, as some war

criminals are not held accountable for their actions (Doumit, 2020; Herremans & Destrooper, 2021). The selected tweet by Abdulaziz reflects this viewpoint, as some micro-celebrities disagree with the prosecution of Raslan and Al-Gharib because it does not align with their justice narrative.

The last view mentioned by fewer than one in five micro-celebrities is linked to the former one in that the real perpetrators are not being held accountable. For example, Lina Shamy, a NY Times columnist who witnessed the fall of Aleppo up close (Shamy, 2017), tweeted:

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*“Most of the Syrians today do not find what is going on in Koblenz Court a historical moment that leads to the trial of the regime. As some people describe it. Oppressed people know the meaning of justice just like they know injustice. Without a real political transition, the regime will keep supreme immunity with regard to all the crimes that they already did” (Shamy, 2021)*

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As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Al-Assad and other senior officials have to this day not been prosecuted for various reasons. However, in other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, political leaders have successfully been prosecuted. Which raises the question: why is Syria failing to prosecute their political leaders? Where other countries succeeded? Aboueldahab (2017) argues that the absence of prosecution is caused by both domestic and international actors pursuing competing accountability agendas, such as Russia vetoing Syria being referred to the ICC because they benefit from keeping Al-Assad in power. After all, Syria is their ally in the Middle East and their most significant buyer of weapons. Moreover, Russia's ties to Syria make it a vital mediator in the Syrian peace process, which increases its international standing (Mirovalev, 2016; Petkova, 2020; The Economist, 2012). The West has also refrained from prosecuting Al-Assad and other senior officials because they fear anti-Western Islamists will replace the regime (Lund, 2019). The arbitrariness of the international community on whether or not to prosecute political leaders can therefore be seen as a form of selective justice. International and domestic actors strategically use transitional justice to appease public anger or silence political dissidents without achieving meaningful accountability (Aboueldahab, 2017). Thus, this view argues that the decision to prosecute political leaders is depends on the conflicting interests of international and domestic actors.

### Discourse analysis of pro-regime tweets

Remarkably, the pro-regime micro-celebrities hardly tweeted about the Koblenz trial. Only one micro-celebrity tweeted about the Koblenz trial, making it impossible to derive a specific view or theme. Still, the tweet is interesting enough to take into account, as it gives us some indication as to what the pro-regime viewpoint could look like - approval of the prosecution as both Raslan and Al-Gharib are seen as traitors to the regime. Andrew Britani, a Syrian Christian and supporter of the Syrian Socialist National Party, tweeted:

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*“Nono, they did not come to spy. He defected from the government with his friend, they are traitors to both sides, the “opposition” and the government. They came to hide in Germany to join the “Opposition” movement. Now both sides hate him” (Britani, 2020)*

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While most regime supporters will likely see these cases as propaganda spread by the West to harm the regime (Doumit, 2020), it is also possible that they manifested Van Dijk’s (2000) Us vs Them mentality by arguing that when Raslan and Al-Gharib fled Syria, they were no longer perceived as regime supporters but traitors (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). This view is made even more plausible by both Raslan and Al-Gharib having been part of the opposition, albeit temporarily (BBC News, 2021; El-Hitami, 2020a). Furthermore, the opposition reinforces this view by disagreeing with prosecuting defectors because they believe it will discourage future defectors (SJAC, 2020). As a result, the pro-regime side would likely confirm that Raslan and Al-Gharib are part of the opposition, as they have indeed betrayed the regime. However, it is impossible to determine whether this view is broadly endorsed by regime supporters based on one tweet, and there is no academic or grey literature to be found that describes the regime’s perspective on the Koblenz process.

## The Islam Alloush trial

On January 29, 2020, the French authorities arrested Majdi Nehme, also known as Islam Alloush, and charged him with committing war crimes including torture and enforced disappearance. Majdi Nehme was the former spokesperson of Jaysh al-Islam, a Sunni Islamist opposition faction involved in the Syrian conflict. Jaysh al-Islam is suspected by human rights organizations of having kidnapped, detained, and tortured the "Douma 4" (SCM, 2020), as well as endangering soldiers and civilians, including women, by placing them in metal cages throughout Eastern Ghouta to deter indiscriminate regime attacks on the area (HRW, 2020).

In 2016, Nehme resigned as the former spokesperson of Jaysh al-Islam and started studying at a Turkish university. Three years later, he received an Erasmus student visa from the France embassy in Istanbul to study at a French university (Al-Modon, 2020). However, in early 2020, Nehme was arrested and charged with crimes against humanity allegedly committed during his time with Jaysh al-Islam by the war crimes unit of the Paris Tribunal, based on evidence provided against him by the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), Ligue des Droits Humains (LDH) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). Nearly a year later, Nehme's family tweeted the following photo, claiming that French police had beaten him severely during his arrest and that they had been unable to contact him for more than ten months. Furthermore, they claim that he was subjected to severe psychological and physical torture in the French prison (Malas, 2021). To this day, he is still waiting in a French prison for his trial to begin. Even though the trial has not yet started, it is still an interesting case to analyse as it shows that former "opposition" members are not immune from prosecution under the universal jurisdiction in the West for war crimes committed in Syria.



*Picture 1: Picture of a severely beaten Majdi Nehme two days after his arrest*

### Discourse analysis of pro-opposition tweets

This section will discuss the four different themes and views derived from the pro-opposition's tweets about the Islam Alloush trial and how they are legitimized and supported by particular framings and discourses. Similar to the Koblenz trial, the opposition is divided about the Islam Alloush trial. Most of them disagree with the prosecution of minor criminals, while the main criminals can continue to perpetrate war crimes. Moreover, they see it as an insult to the Syrian revolution because the first trials for violations in Syria are against people affiliated with the opposition (Kaddour, 2020). Most micro-celebrities disagree with the prosecution of Nehme but differ on whom to blame for his unjust prosecution. Twenty five pro-opposition micro-celebrities tweeted about the Islam Alloush trial of which more than a third of the micro-celebrities mentioned the first view which blames civil society organizations for Majdi's unfair prosecution. For example, Wael Abdulaziz, a media activist affiliated with the FSA, tweeted:



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*“The civil society that worked on the trial of the dissident Iyad Al- Gharib, and who worked on the arrest of Majdi Nehme and forged documents and witnesses to convict him, is a counter-revolutionary society whose actions today serve Al-Assad. This society is tampering with the revolution's rights file and standing in the way of justice. The path of justice does not begin with holding dissidents accountable, you idiots” (Abdulaziz, 2021b)*

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The opposition supporters blame civil society organizations for these unjust prosecutions because Nehme was arrested based on evidence provided by SCM, LDH, and FIDH. These organizations seek to bring to light the truth of the Syrian conflict through documentation to retain perpetrators of serious crimes in Syria accountable regardless of their affiliation, thereby seeking justice for all Syrian victims (SCM, 2021). However, as explained earlier, even with the right intentions, civil society organizations can lead to the omission of various voices and topics from the justice narrative (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021). Moreover, there is a multitude of victim narratives in Syria because multiple actors have committed serious crimes, such as regime or opposition militias, foreign fighters or terrorist groups such as ISIS (Aboueldahab, 2018). These different narratives are forms of personal truth, which is essential to the transitional justice process (Best et al., 2011). However, differing personal truths in Syria give rise to much debate on the topic of prosecutions, as a prosecuted party can often be seen as criminal in the eyes of one group, yet innocent in the eyes of the next one. Civil society organization try to avoid this to their best ability by holding every criminal accountable regardless of their affiliation. To summarize, the micro-celebrities that adhere to this viewpoint accuse civil society organizations of unjustly prosecuting Nehme, as the organizations adhere to different personal truths.

The second view mentioned by almost half of the micro-celebrities blames the French government for the unjust prosecution of Nehme. For example, Tamam Abou Al-Kheir, the editor of the news website Noonpost, tweeted:

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*“France does not stay away from continuous criminality, its history full of massacres and killings is still going on, and the lie that says it is a country of human rights is becoming clear to us day after day, insult to religion and torture of detainees.*

*The revolutionary detainee, Majdi Nehme, in the prisons of France, was tortured because he was one of the Syrian revolutionaries and fighters.  
#BoycottFrenchProducts” (Abou Al-Kheir, 2021)*

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Before the prosecution of Nehme, tensions between the Arab world and French government were already higher than usual. The cause of this lies with the murdering of Samuel Paty - a history teacher who was murdered after showing caricatures of the prophet Mohammed in class - and president Macron response proposal to tackle Islamist separatism. Furthermore, Macron went on to praise the late Paty, and described Islam as a ‘religion in crisis’. In response, several Islamic countries called for a boycott of French products to denounce the - in their opinion - increasing Islamophobia in Europe (Guenfoud, 2020). That is why several Islamic countries called for a boycott of French products to



denounce the increasing Islamophobia in Europe (Guenfoud, 2020). In light of the recent history, many Syrians believed the beating during Nehme's arrest to be a deliberate act due to his affiliation with a Sunni Islamist opposition faction (SCM, 2020). This perception of Islamophobia is reinforced by the international community's definition of terrorism as "a type of violence perpetrated by "Islamic-inspired" non-state groups" (Martini, 2019, p. 728), as evidenced by the fact that more than half of universal jurisdiction cases prosecute terrorists as opposed to regime officials (Doumit, 2020). Moreover, the regime plays into feelings of Islamophobia by portraying the opposition as terrorists, legitimizing their excessive violence against the opposition (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021; Martini, 2019). Thus, some micro-celebrities accuse the French government of unjustly persecuting Nehme because they suspect them of purposely oppressing Islamists because of their growing Islamophobia.

The third view mentioned by a fifth of the micro-celebrities connects with the former view by stating that it is hypocritical that France persecuted Nehme, but not Rifaat Al-Assad. For example, Hothifh, a journalist from Deir Ez-Zor, tweeted:

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*"The first is an opponent of the Assad regime in the prisons of #France.  
The second is a butcher who killed tens of thousands with evidence in Hama and Palmyra prison  
and looted billions of dollars. Living a dignified life in France.  
#Majdi\_Nehme" (Hothifah, 2021)*

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This example perfectly captures selective justice in the prosecution of Syrian war criminals. Rifaat al-Assad, Bashar's uncle, was the leader of the Defense Brigades responsible for the massacres in Hama and Palmyra prison, where tens of thousands of Syrians were killed. However, in 1984 he was forced to live in exile in Europe after a failed coup against Hafez. Since then, several civil society organizations have filed multiple lawsuits in Spain, France and Switzerland against Rifaat al-Assad for committing war crimes. Despite sufficient evidence and numerous witnesses, the cases were dismissed (SHRC, 2020; TRIAL International, 2017). Instead, he received the Legion of Honor from former French President Francois Mitterrand, France's highest order of merit (The New Arab, 2020). Eventually, anti-corruption organization Sherpa succeeded in bringing him to trial, not for war crimes but for money laundering, tax fraud and embezzlement. However, it took Sherpa five years after the lawsuit was filed until he was brought to trial (SHRC, 2020; The New Arab, 2020).

By comparing this case with Nehme's case, it is demonstrated that some war criminals are treated differently than others. This double standard is caused not only by the West's focus on terrorism but also by hiding the West's possible involvement in these crimes through financial, military or political support. For example, Rifaat al-Assad has several strong foreign relations who supported him during his coup against Hafez and for whom he solved several problems during his exile (Fisk, 2017). Consequently, this view argued that there is selective justice due to the unequal prosecution of war criminals caused by the West's focus on terrorism and their indirect involvement in these crimes.

All these actors have in common that they criminalize the dissidents, which is the last view mentioned by two of the five micro-celebrities. For example, Colonel Halid Kutayni, a defected officer

of the Syrian Army who now moves between Idlib and Turkey (Al-Khateb, 2019), tweeted:

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*“A fact that everyone should know, politicized justice.  
The discretion of those who pursue dissidents exclusively and seek to convict them of placing various charges on them, while turning a blind eye to hundreds of perpetrators of crimes and murders, including members of the Shabiha and leaders of groups belonging to the Assad regime gang. This is a lame justice that has nothing to do with the revolution and its principles.  
#Majdi\_Nehme” (Kutayni, 2021)*

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In his tweet, he identifies politicized justice as the cause of the criminalization of dissidents. There are three causes for the politicization of justice: unilaterality, impunity, and impotence (Massias, 2015). First, unilaterality in Syria happens as dissidents and "terrorists" are mainly the ones who are brought to justice rather than senior regime officials (Doumit, 2020), which can be explained by the fact that the regime, with the help of Russia, managed to turn the conflict in their favour. Second, impunity in Syria takes place as the international community agreed that a transitional body with full executive powers would be established so that the regime could be brought to justice (BBC News, 2012; Ki-moon, 2012). However, the regime is still in power, so the agreements made during the Syrian peace talks cannot be implemented, resulting in the regime's impunity (Odeh et al., 2019). Finally, impotence in Syria occurs as the international community is unable to bring high-level regime officials to justice because these efforts are blocked by Russia and China (Bdiwi, 2019). Therefore, this view holds the stance that dissidents are criminalized because transitional justice risks being distorted through politics due to unilaterality, impunity and impotence.

### Discourse analysis of pro-regime tweets

A total of five pro-regime micro-celebrities tweeted about the Islam Alloush trial which is more than the Koblenz trial. They were all unanimous in their view on Islam Alloush, who was widely considered to be a terrorist and deserving of prosecution. For example, Omar Rahmon, a member of the National Reconciliation Centre affiliated with the regime and Russia (Al-Khateb, 2020), tweeted:

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*“Islam Alloush, or the assistant Majdi Nehme, the official spokesperson for Jaysh al-Islam, after he and his group destroyed Syria. They fled to Europe and found part of what they deserved of divine punishment for what they committed.  
And some of them said that it was a French crime with a Ba’athist flavor.  
Listen carefully, everyone who is dissident from the army will be arrested.” (Rahmon, 2021a)*

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Like the other views of pro-regime micro-celebrities, this view is legitimized and supported by the terrorism discourse. Rahmon falsely accuses Nehme and Jaysh al-Islam of destroying Syria when the regime was actually responsible for it. Thereby indirectly conveying his worldview through his language (Ali & Omar, 2016). Moreover, he notes that opposition members frame Nehme's torture as a French crime with a Ba’athist flavour, which refers to the French colonization of Syria. During the

French colonization, the Alawites, of which the regime is a part, were favoured by the French and learned from them how to suppress the Syrian population (Van Dam, 2017). Finally, the last sentence of the tweet confirms the suspicion that regime supporters regard dissidents as traitors. That is because Majdi Nehme defected from the Syrian army before becoming the spokesman for Jaysh al-Islam (Kajjo, 2020). Here too, the Us vs Them mentality of Van Dijk (2000) is used by emphasizing the “either you are with us, or you are against us” principle (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Consequently, Rahmon’s tweet emphasized the frame that Majdi Nehme is a terrorist and deserving of prosecution by using Halliday’s Transitivity Theory (1985) and Van Dijk’s (2000) Us vs Them mentality.

## 6. Discussion

This section provides an in-depth discussion of the pro-opposition and pro-regime view of the Syrian peace and transitional justice cases. First, the results are interpreted based on a description of the target group, the role of Twitter, theoretical explanations and the influence of (inter)national actors. Subsequently, it is discussed to what extent the results correspond to the theoretical framework and whether they have led to new or different insights. Finally, some suggestions are made for possible further research.

### Pro-opposition discourses or framings

#### Target audience

Most pro-opposition micro-celebrities tweet in Arabic, and therefore targeting Arab-speaking people, specifically Syrians. As the pro-opposition group is extremely negative towards the regime and Astana trio, it is unlikely that supporters of the regime are part of their target group. Furthermore, many micro-celebrities are pessimistic about the opposition delegation, which could either be aimed at the opposition delegation to dissuade them from going to the Syrian peace talks, or at Syrians who are not part of the opposition delegation to show the uselessness of the Syrian peace talks.

This view is contradicted by the micro-celebrities who have been positive about the Syrian peace talks because they are affiliated with the opposition delegation, for example, Yasser Abdel-Rahim, spokesman for the opposition during the Astana talks, and George Sabra, who is a former spokesman for the opposition during the negotiations in Geneva (SOHR, 2019). These micro-celebrities do not target the same audience as the other micro-celebrities. They seem to target their (former) opposition factions to legitimize their participation in the Syrian peace talks. For example, Yasser Abdel-Rahim targets the Al-Sham Brigade, a military faction with former links to the FSA and Ahrar al-Sham (CISAC, 2019b), focusing on military goals such as protecting their people in the liberated areas and preserving the safety and security of the civilians. In addition, George Sabra focuses on the SNC, reflected in his focus on the international legitimacy of the talks in Geneva. This legitimacy is essential for the SNC as they were the first opposition faction to participate in the negotiations in Geneva, which indirectly gave them legitimacy as an opposition faction because the UN set up the talks (Carnegie Middle East Center 2013; Hurd, 2002).

Furthermore, some micro-celebrities use Twitter as a platform to promote their work as a journalist, such as Hayvi Bouzo and Faisal al-Qassem. Hayvi Bouzo is the bureau chief for Orient News in Washington DC and has made multiple political TV shows on current affairs in the US and the Middle East affairs, as well as having interviewed many prominent American officials, such as former Secretary of State John Kerry and Senator John McCain (Bouzo, n.d.). As her goal is to educate the international community on the situation in Syria, Bouzo mostly writes her tweets in English language. As for Faisal al-Qassem, the TV host of *Opposite Direction*, which is the first public debate program in the Arab region discussing opposing views on various topics related to the politics of the Arab world and became one of the most influential programs on Al Jazeera. (Al Jazeera, n.d.). Al-Qassem wants to encourage the Arab world to free itself from dictatorships, despots, and traditions with his tweets.

While their journalistic and social media efforts are primarily aimed at informing the general public and encouraging discussion, Bouzo and Al-Qassem do not intend to keep a neutral stance on the Syrian conflict. On the contrary, they encourage Syrians to rise against the regime's oppression.

However, micro-celebrities tweeting about the transitional justice process are not targeting their tweets exclusively to pro-opposition supporters. They also threaten regime officials that they will ultimately be held accountable for their crimes and accuse civil society activists of selective justice to prosecute dissidents rather than senior regime officials (Abdulaziz, 2021a). For example, in Abdulaziz's tweet, he addresses civil society activists as "you idiots" (Abdulaziz, 2021b). In addition, pro-opposition micro-celebrities call on the international community to focus not solely on prosecuting terrorists but also on bringing senior regime officials to justice (Doumit, 2020). Moreover, they encourage opposition supporters to boycott French products because of the Islamophobic attitude of the French government, which has led to the prosecution of opposition members affiliated with Islamist factions (Abou Al-Kheir, 2021 ). Lastly, the pro-opposition micro-celebrities want to inform the general public and encourage discussion about the transitional justice process because its success depends on how well it fits society's needs and culture (Massias, 2015).

### The role of Twitter

Most traditional media in Syria are affiliated with the regime, making it difficult for the opposition to share alternative discourses. Twitter makes it easier for the opposition to share their discourses because they do not have to go through the regime's framing and gatekeeping procedures (De Angelis & Badran, 2015). In addition, Twitter is more accessible to the general Syrian public because it is free, fast and almost universally available, allowing them to quickly and widely disseminate their alternative discourses, which are not represented in the traditional media. Moreover, it is more difficult for the regime to censor Twitter than conventional media (De Angelis, 2011; Rohde et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Twitter is a microblogging site that allows users to share their thoughts on specific topics, making it perfect for spreading these alternative discourses (Nissen, 2015). For example, through interpersonal search, Syrians can find other Syrians with whom they can bond about shared values, such as #Astana\_Not\_For\_Syrians, which connects people who believe that Astana does not protect Syrian interests.

Since Twitter has a 280-character limit for its tweets, leaving limited room for micro-celebrities to express their views into words, they often include photos, videos, and hyperlinks to back up their tweets. For example, photos and videos of tortured and injured people or damaged buildings to show the regime's war crimes or hyperlinks to news articles or Facebook posts that provide additional information about the Syrian conflict. These photos and videos play an essential role in the transitional justice process in Syria, as justice actors can collect them as collect evidence of war crimes during the Syrian conflict to conduct further investigations, confirm witness statements and strengthen prosecutions (Aksamitowska, 2021; Freeman, 2018). Moreover, the sharing of photos and videos enabled justice actors to crowdsource evidence collection via social media (Al-Omouh & Yaseen, 2016; Tenove, 2019).

Furthermore, social media is an essential means of communication between exiled Syrians and Syrians in Syria, making it easier to form networks to track down war criminals who entered Europe via the refugee influx and prosecute them under universal jurisdiction (France 24, 2021; Tenove, 2019). Lastly, Twitter allows Syrians in Syria to stay informed about universal jurisdiction cases in the West, which is vital for the transitional justice process because its success depends on how well it fits the needs and culture of Syrian society (Massias, 2015).

### Theoretical explanations

This section provides a theoretical explanation of the pro-opposition views of the Syrian peace and transitional justice cases. First, the negative pro-opposition discourses regarding the Syrian peace talks can be explained by Lederach's three gaps in the peacebuilding process: the interdependence gap, the justice gap, and the process structure gap (Buchanan, 2014a).

First, the peace negotiations have failed to close the interdependence gap in Syria, as UN special envoys are unable to rebuild horizontal capacity between the regime and opposition delegation, and even within the opposition delegation there exists a feeling of distrust between members. Moreover, rebuilding vertical capacity between the opposition delegation and the general Syrian public is also a problem given the fact less than 30% of Syrians are supporters of the regime or opposition. The rest is divided into two groups: one that disapproves of the regime but trusts the opposition even less, and another that disapproves of the opposition but trusts the regime even less (Van Dam, 2017). As a result, vertical capacity is almost non-existent as only a small number of the general public is affiliated with the opposition delegation, complicating Syrian peace talks.

Whether social media is closing or widening the interdependence gap in Syria is hard to say. On the one hand, the opposition delegation could use social media to build vertical capacity with the general Syrian public by sharing information and encouraging online debate (Kasadha, 2020). Yet, nodocentrism could make it more difficult to connect with the general Syrian public as they are less visible online (Mejias, 2009). However, it would not be impossible to get in touch with this group if the opposition delegation made an effort to contact them (De Angelis & Badran, 2021). On the other hand, building horizontal capacity through social media is hard because echo chambers prevent opposition supporters from connecting with regime supporters (De Angelis, 2011). However, if the large majority of Syrians that supports neither side was to mobilize itself through connective action, the opposition and regime parties could potentially be pushed to make peace (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Van Dam, 2017). Yet, as social media tends to increase rather than reduce fragmentation among Syrians, the possibility of this happening seems unlikely (De Angelis & Badran, 2015). Hence, it is clear that a fair amount of willingness is needed to close the interdependence gap, but for now, it does not look like it will happen anytime soon.

Second, it is difficult to speak of a justice gap, as peace has not yet been achieved in Syria. However, the opposition did make various demands, such as the regime's overthrow, the release of detainees, the lifting of sieges and access to humanitarian aid. Yet, the opposition delegation failed to secure these demands, reaching only some fragile ceasefires and de-escalation zones, which continued to be bombed by the regime. Moreover, under international pressure, the opposition

delegation has waived these demands to participate in the peace negotiations, losing their legitimacy to represent the opposition. In short, the opposition expected certain demands to be met, but the opposition delegation failed to achieve these demands.

Social media has the potential to close the justice gap through truth-telling. One of the problems in the peace talks is that the opposition delegation has neglected to listen to the rest of the opposition factions. If they had looked through opposition members' personal stories online, they would have been better able to represent their interests in peace negotiations. These personal stories are portrayed in the micro-celebrities tweets. Therefore, documenting multiple stories and different claims to truth in Syria is central (Aboueldahab, 2018).

Third, the peace negotiations so far have only focused only on stopping direct violence through ceasefires and de-escalations zones , but did not tackle any of the structural and cultural problems in Syria, such as corruption, lack of freedom and human rights and simmering sectarian hatred (Van Dam, 2017). While it is critical to end direct violence, fighting will most likely continue until these issues are resolved, preventing Syrians from achieving lasting peace.

Social media crowdsourcing has the potential to resolve these structural and cultural problems. Syrians are already using it to exchange, disseminate and share information, solutions and advice on coping with the consequences of the conflict. However, one major barrier for sharing information on structural and cultural problems is that it can attract the attention of regime members as well, exposing online activists and their family members to the risk of being tracked down, threatened, or harassed. For example, the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), a pro-regime hacktivist group, threatens opponents of the regime and spreads disinformation about the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, ISIS uses social media to spread its ideas, recruit new members and incite hate speech. Therefore, Syrians constantly weigh the risks against the benefits it brings them (Al-Omouh & Yaseen, 2016). While social media crowdsourcing is currently mainly used to obtain basic needs, security and information, it could ultimately solve structural and cultural problems in Syria. For example, through online discussion on how to solve these structural and cultural problems (Doumit, 2020). However, this depends on the amount of risk Syrians are willing to take.

In short, social media has the potential to reduce Lederach's three gaps in the peacebuilding process, but Syrians must actively and intensively employ the positive functions of social media to reduce them. In addition, Syrians must be protected against the negative effects of social media so that the risks of using social media are reduced.

Furthermore, several pro-opposition discourses on the Syrian transitional justice cases argued that some victims' justice narratives had been omitted. In Syria, they are omitted by three actors: the regime, which silences victims by threatening, detaining or killing them; the West, which mainly focuses on terrorism due to their war on terror; and civil society organizations, which are forced to only engage in cases that will lead to a conviction. These first two omissions can be defined as erasure because the regime and the West deliberately omit unwanted justice narratives. However, this latter omission is both a form of erasure and invisibility because it is caused by judicial restrictions in international law (Herremans & Destrooper, 2021). In addition, there is also politicization of justice in Syria, as the international community mainly persecutes dissidents and "terrorists" rather than high-

ranking regime officials, indirectly giving the regime amnesty because they are unable to hold the regime to account due to the veto of Russia and China (Massias, 2015). Both omissions and politicization of justice lead to selective justice, causing frustration among victims.

Social media could provide these victims with a way to still share their justice narratives through truth-telling, as they are not held back by specific framing and gatekeeping procedures (De Angelis & Badran, 2015). However, nodocentrism could cause their justice narratives to be less visible (Mejias, 2009). Still, these effects are possible to bypass if justice actors actively search for these narratives (De Angelis & Badran, 2021). For example, the SJAC organized an online discussion in Arabic about the Koblenz trial, which discussed the trial’s impact on justice for Syria with a broad audience (Doumit, 2020). Social media is also being used to gather evidence in the Koblenz and Islam Alloush cases to investigate further, corroborate witness statements and strengthen prosecutions (Aksamitowska, 2021; Freeman, 2018). Moreover, Syrian activists use it to form networks to track down regime officers who have entered Europe via the refugee influx, contributing to the prosecution of regime officials (France 24, 2021).

In short, social media has the potential to counter selective justice by enabling Syrians to tell their truth and contribute to the prosecution of war criminals.

### The influence of (inter)national actors

Micro-celebrities affiliated with certain opposition factions use their tweets to influence international support. There has always been a struggle between different opposition factions to gain international support for their fight against the regime. Instead of providing each opposition faction with the same amount of international support, all opposition factions received different stream of support from various countries such as the US, EU countries and some Arab countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. However, these countries pursued conflicting interests, leading opposition factions to pursue conflicting goals to ensure they continue to receive support (Lund, 2019). The following box provides an overview of which country each opposition faction receives support:

**Overview of international support for each opposition faction**

**Syrian National Council (SNC):** Backed by Turkey and the US because the US refused to support armed Islamist factions for fear of replacing the regime with anti-Western jihadists (Lund, 2019)

**National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC):** Initially rejected international support and foreign military intervention, because they wanted to put pressure on the regime from within Syrian society to find a political solution. However, they have met with Russia, Iran, China, Egypt, Tunisia, EU, US, South Africa and Japan to exchange views with them (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2012)

**Free Syrian Army (FSA):** Their international support ceased due to the West's lack of trust in them and fear of supporting anti-Western jihadists, leading them to transfer to other factions, such as the Turkey-sponsored Syrian National Army (SNA) (Al Nofal, 2021)

**Jaysh al-Islam & Ahrar al-Sham:** Received strong support from Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, who did not mind their Islamist leanings as long as they resisted the regime and did not radicalize like ISIS (Cassman, 2017; CISAC, 2019a)



# Pro-regime discourses or framings

## Target audience

Nearly half of pro-regime micro-celebrities tweet in English, implying that they want to reach an international audience to gain international legitimacy. While pro-regime micro-celebrities are normally quite anti-Western, it is beneficial to increase international legitimacy through the terrorism discourse to which the West is sensitive as labelling them as terrorists could change the international community's view of the opposition. The following box lists some international followers of pro-regime micro-celebrities who could be influenced by them:

**International followers of pro-regime micro-celebrities**

**Aaron Maté:** a Canadian journalist who wrote a controversial article about the Wikileaks documents casting doubt on the OPCW conclusion about the Douma chemical attack, which blamed the regime. He even testified at the UN at Russia's invitation, where he accused the OPCW of falsifying the Douma report (Bellingcat, 2020)

**Hala Jaber:** a Lebanese-British award-winning Sunday Times journalist who has come under fire for her email correspondence with a member of SEA. She is one of the few journalists favored by the regime and interviewed Assad twice during the conflict (Al-Bawaba, 2015)

**Joshua Landis:** an American academic specialized in the Middle East and an expert on Syria who writes a popular blog called Syria Comment. He often travels to Washington DC to advise government agencies (The University of Oklahoma, n.d.)

**Liz Sly:** a British journalist for the Washington Post, who covers the Middle East. She posted a photo taken by a Turkish journalist of a dead toddler washed up on a beach, which was retweeted more than 7,000 times and temporarily changed the online discourse on immigration in favour of refugees (University of Sheffield, 2015)

As demonstrated by these examples, international supporters specialized in Syria have the potential to influence the international discourse on the Syrian conflict. Therefore, pro-regime micro-celebrities could indirectly affect the global discourse on the Syrian conflict by tweeting in English. Aside from their international following, pro-regime micro-celebrities also target regime supporters as they are generally pessimistic about the opposition.

In general, few pro-regime micro-celebrities tweet about universal jurisdiction, probably because regime supporters do not have to worry about prosecution if they do not travel to a country with universal jurisdiction (Bdiwi, 2019). However, micro-celebrities who have tweeted about this topic mainly target dissidents and the international community. For example, pro-regime micro-celebrities threaten dissidents from the Syrian army that they will be arrested if they flee Syria (Rahmon, 2021a) because they believe these dissidents are traitors to the regime (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Hence, they target the international community by tweeting that they condone the prosecution of these dissidents (Britani, 2020).

## The role of Twitter

Twitter serves an important function to the pro-regime micro-celebrities in reaching the international community as pro-regime micro-celebrities do not face the same challenges as the pro-opposition

micro-celebrities when it comes to framing and gatekeeping procedures as the regime owns the traditional media (De Angelis & Badran, 2015). Therefore, the pro-regime camp is less dependent of social media to voice their views, resulting in a significantly smaller Twitter presence compared to pro-opposition micro-celebrities. Moreover, their mostly English tweets and Martini's (2019) claim evidenced that the regime has instrumentalized terrorism discourse to delegitimize the opposition in the eyes of the international community. By influencing their international followers, who can change the global discourse on the Syrian peace talks in favour of the regime. Yet, it differs per follower whether they will use their influence to favour the regime.

In addition, the regime lifted the ban on social media in 2011, which some argued would make it easier to track Syrians, especially opposition members (York, 2011). This is confirmed by the regime's use of social media for digital repression to track down opposition members by tracking their online activities and identifying them in videos and photos of the protests (Moss, 2016). In addition, regime officials examined whether opposition members' electronic devices had software that could bypass the regime's spyware and which Internet cafes they were using (Rohde et al., 2016). Moreover, imprisoned opposition members were forced to give up their social media passwords during interrogations, allowing the regime to infiltrate opposition networks to collect personal information about other opposition members. Consequently, Syrians were discouraged from participating in the protests for fear of being arrested (De Angelis, 2011).

The online crackdown worsened as the SEA began attacking the opposition and their allies by monitoring their online activities, threatening them and their relatives, hacking into their accounts and reporting their activities as offensive so that their accounts and content would be deleted. They also spread disinformation and propaganda by promoting that the uprising was the work of foreign conspirators, terrorists and criminals in hopes of gaining sympathy and support from outside allies (Al-Rawi, 2014; Moss, 2016 ).

While digital repression did not deter all opposition members, it made them aware of the negative impact of their online activities and discouraged Syrians from speaking out for the opposition. As a result, opposition members became afraid to communicate with their relatives, causing them to cut ties as a precaution. Even if opposition members did not cut themselves off, their families and friends did so instead as a precaution against possible regime reprisals, leading to network erosion. Furthermore, having pro-regime Syrians as "friends" on social media was also considered dangerous because connections with them could expose opposition members and others in their contact lists to pro-regime hackers. Conversely, Syrians who expressed support for the regime out of fear of repression would also be put at risk if they were connected with opposition members, leading to the social sorting of Syrians into pro-opposition and pro-regime networks online. Ultimately, some Syrians even decided to censor their online activities to not endanger themselves and their family members. This self-censorship went so far that Syrians were afraid to participate in offline events to show their support for the opposition as well, fearing that opposition members would document these events and reveal their identities. In short, social media enabled the regime to oppress Syrians at home and abroad, making the relatively simple acts of online activism important

forms of resistance by Syrians as the regime actively suppresses, denies and alters their reality (Moss, 2016).

### Theoretical explanations and the influence of (inter)national actors

The pro-regime discourse which frames the opposition as terrorists can be explained by Martini's (2019) article on the regime's instrumentalization of the terrorism discourse. While Martini (2019) focused on discourses at United Nations Security Council meetings, it can also be applied to micro-celebrities' discourses on the Syrian peace and justice processes. She argued that it was a deliberate political choice by the regime to label the opposition as terrorists. In doing so, the regime sought to delegitimize the participation of the opposition delegation in the peace negotiations and influence the international community's view of the opposition. Moreover, the regime tried to legitimize their violent repression of the opposition by presenting themselves as the local frontline in the global war on terror.

This frame was readily accepted due to the international community's definition of terrorism as "a type of violence perpetrated by "Islamic-inspired" non-state groups" (Martini, 2019, p. 728). For example, the regime claimed that the opposition was engaged in radical Islam, women's oppression, brutal punishment and locking people up in cages. Indeed, most military factions were Islamist, such as Ahrar al-Sham or Jaysh al-Islam, and had fought occasionally with the Al-Nusra Front, which is on the UN's list of designated terrorist groups. As a result, the regime was able to reject peace talks with these factions while maintaining their power and legitimacy in the international community's eyes. Moreover, it justified Russia's military intervention in Syria.

Additionally, the regime used this frame to delegitimize countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia by accusing them of supporting terrorism. In response, these countries accused the regime of state terrorism in order to legitimize the opposition's violence as self-defence. However, as the conceptualization of terrorism in the international community does not involve states chances of this discourse being widely accepted are small, whereas the regime's discourse on terrorism fits the conceptualization perfectly. At the same time, the regime's discourse on terrorism makes it more difficult for the West to support the military factions as it would appear to be conflicting with their war on terror. Therefore, the regime's supporters widely disseminate the regime's terrorism discourse.

Furthermore, the pro-regime micro-celebrities seem to have no problem with the prosecution of dissidents through universal jurisdiction, which can be explained by Van Dijks (2000) Us vs Them mentality (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015; Wondolleck et al., 2003). According to regime supporters, Raslan, Al-Gharib and Nehme are no longer part of the regime's in-group because they have decided to flee Syria, which is based on the "either you are with us, or you are against us" principle. Therefore, they are seen as traitors in the eyes of the regime (Britani, 2020), which is confirmed by the fact that all three have cooperated with the opposition to some extent. For example, Nehme was the spokesman for Jaysh Al-Islam, Raslan was part of the opposition delegation to Geneva, and Al-Gharib has fought with opposition factions in Deir Ez-Zor. Hence, some opposition members disagree with the prosecution of these dissidents. Yet, it remains to be seen whether this cooperation with the

opposition exonerates them from the crimes they committed for the regime. Even though the regime supporters no longer perceive them as part of the regime's 'in-group'.

## Contribution to peace, justice and social media theories

These results are consistent with previous studies showing that social media plays a crucial role in peace and transitional justice processes. The results of the discourse analysis indicate that both sides use social media to legitimize their actions or to delegitimize the other side's actions to their supporters and the international community, which influences the peace and transitional justice processes. This study shows that legitimacy during peace and justice processes is essential to gain support from international parties, which can be achieved through social media, but the different interests of the international parties can also delay peace and justice processes. Furthermore, the results build on Best et al. (2011), who has suggested that social media makes it easier for marginalized groups to share alternative discourses using truth-telling. Based on these findings, it can be argued that selective justice in the Syrian conflict through omissions or politicization of justice can be reduced through truth-telling. As shown in the discourse analysis, justice actors in the Syrian conflict make use of social media to gather evidence about war crimes. This is an essential development, as selective justice hinders peace and transitional justice processes, and truth-telling helps to restore the legitimacy of these processes.

However, the results of this study also indicate that social media can hinder peace and transitional justice processes. These results are in line with the results of Mejias (2009), who showed that social media algorithms make it more difficult for marginalized groups to spread their alternative discourses because nodocentrism ensures that only personal stories of online activists with many followers are shown. Another striking result is that social media algorithms reinforce the Us vs Them mentality, as they tend to connect like-minded people in echo chambers, which reinforces their individual beliefs by reducing their exposure to alternative views. Therefore, it is possible that the differences between the warring parties are aggravated, reducing the chance of reconciliation. For example, by labeling the opposition as terrorists, pro-regime micro-celebrities categorize opposition members as enemies, which discourages them to negotiate with the opposition. Finally, these results correlate with previous studies indicating that authoritarian regimes use social media for digital repression of their populations, resulting in network erosion, social sorting and self-censorship. In regards to whether or not people will use social media during peace and transitional justice processes, this study shows that it depends on the risks they are willing to take. In short, social media can either facilitate or hinder peace and transitionale justice processes, depending on how different parties use it.

## Further research

Although this research has shown that social media is an essential tool during peace and transition justice processes and can provide peace and justice scholars with insight into what societies think of these processes, the scope of this study is relatively small. Therefore, further research on a larger scale is necessary to increase the credibility of this study, for example, by researching a larger sample of micro-celebrities. However, discourse analysis is a time-consuming process, which is why a larger-

scale study requires more researchers to analyse the large amounts of data involved (Jamal et al., 2015).

In addition, this study focuses only on Syria, so it cannot be generalized to other cases. Therefore, it is necessary to examine or compare different cases in order to get a complete picture of the role of social media in peace and justice processes and to discover possible differences between countries. The recent conflict in Myanmar would be an interesting topic to look into next, as, social media, especially Facebook, has played a fundamental role in the conflict by increasing tensions in society on the one hand and mobilizing society on the other to protest against the military coup collectively (Asher, 2021). This can also provide an opportunity to compare the role of different social networks.

Finally, this research has shown that using qualitative research methods for social media study, such as online discourse analysis, can provide deeper insights into societies' needs, public opinion, behavior, influence, etc. in peace and justice processes. Therefore, future research could focus on deriving criteria to measure the extent to which peace and justice processes meet societies' expectations. Subsequently, these criteria can contribute to quantitative social media research by using them to create measuring instruments that can be used to investigate on a larger scale the extent to which peace processes and processes are in line with the norms and values of conflict societies. In short, qualitative social media research can provide valuable insights that can lay the foundation for larger scale quantitative research to quantitative research (O'Callaghan et al., 2014).

## 7. Conclusion

This study set out to answer the question:

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*What are the main online discourses of Syrian micro-celebrities on Syrian transitional justice and peace processes? And what can they teach us about the future/ next steps of peace and justice in Syria?*

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To this end, a qualitative discourse analysis was conducted on micro-celebrities' tweets about four Syrian peace and transitional justice processes.

The results of the Geneva peace process have shown that both pro-opposition and pro-regime micro-celebrities do not view the Geneva peace talks as a success for several reasons. Almost half of the pro-opposition micro-celebrities argue that the opposition delegation should not have negotiated with the regime in Geneva because they legitimize the regime, which goes against the principles of the revolution. Moreover, they claim that the Geneva peace process only serves foreign interests, is completely unconcerned about what is happening in Syria and is out of touch with the actual situation. They maintain their position that the only way to achieve lasting peace is by holding the regime accountable. By contrast, pro-regime micro-celebrities are against the Geneva peace process because they loathe the West and US interference in Syria. They are refusing to negotiate with the opposition because they claim that opposition members are terrorists.

As was the case with the Geneva peace process, most pro-opposition micro-celebrities criticized the opposition delegation in Astana. Similarly, there was a strong conviction that the Astana trio acted out of self-interest rather than the support of Syrian people. While there was also a share of pro-opposition micro-celebrities that voiced a more positive attitude towards the Astana peace talks, it should be noted that these were primarily micro-celebrities affiliated with Turkey and the opposition delegation. On the other side, pro-regime micro-celebrities were positive about Astana and even suggested that Astana should replace the Geneva peace process. In addition, similar to Geneva, they continued labelling opposition members as terrorists to justify the violence against the opposition and to delegitimize the opposition delegation during the negotiations.

The results of the transitional justice cases have shown that pro-opposition micro-celebrities generally argued that the Koblenz trial was a start to holding the regime accountable by demonstrating the bureaucracy behind their war crimes. However, about a quarter claimed Koblenz was a case of selective justice, since only low-level regime officials were prosecuted rather than those primarily responsible, Al-Assad and other senior regime officials, who the international community was unable to prosecute because the Syrian case could not be referred to the ICC. Almost no pro-regime micro-celebrities tweeted about Koblenz, and the only one who did suggested that Aslan and Al-Gharib deserved to be prosecuted because they were traitors of the regime.

Finally, the results of the Islam Alloush trial showed that most pro-opposition micro-celebrities disagreed with the prosecution of Majdi Nehme. However, they differed on who to blame for his unjust prosecution. Some accused civil society organizations because they disagreed with

prosecuting opposition members. Others have alleged that the French government deliberately persecuted Islamists for reasons of Islamophobia and suggested that Nehme's prosecution was a case of selective justice, given that Rifaat al-Assad was never prosecuted for his war crimes. However, all agreed that dissidents were criminalized because of the politicization of justice. In contrast, the pro-regime micro-celebrities unanimously agreed that Nehme was a terrorist who got what he deserved.

From this qualitative discourse analysis, it can be concluded that pro-opposition micro-celebrities generally lack confidence in a peace process without justice. For that reason, they are skeptical of the efforts made so far in peace negotiations and universal jurisdiction cases against regime members, and believe that the international community is not serving the interests of the Syrian people. On the other hand, pro-regime micro-celebrities continue to portray the opposition as terrorists in order to reduce their chances of justice and delegitimize their participation in the peace processes. In addition, they try to avoid foreign interference as much as possible, unless they are parties that contribute to the violence against and the persecution of opposition members.

These findings suggest that the Syrian peace and transition justice process will not lead to long-lasting peace in Syria if it continues this way. For the vast majority of pro-opposition micro-celebrities who represent the views of a large group of opposition members, the only way to achieve lasting peace is to hold the regime accountable. However, with the impossibility of prosecuting through the ICC due to conflicting foreign interests, it is unlikely the regime will be brought to justice as long as they remain in power (Williams et al., 2018). Therefore, Syrians will be forced to find other solutions to achieve peace and justice in the meantime. As established in the current study, social media is a tool that can potentially contribute in working towards these solutions. Social media enables Syrians, among other things, to share alternative discourses, tell their stories through truth-telling, gather evidence of war crimes and participate in discussions about the peace process (Aksamitowska, 2021; Best et al., 2011; De Angelis & Badran, 2015; Doumit, 2020; Freeman, 2018). Furthermore, social media can provide peacemakers with insight into Syrian needs during the peace and justice process so they can adjust their peace and justice initiatives accordingly (Jamal et al., 2015). However, using social media as a tool in the peace and justice process is not without risks. The first one is social media's tendency to exacerbate differences within Syrian society through nodocentrism and echo chambers. Even more dangerous is the risk of Syrian opposition members being exposed online, with the threat of regime members using social media as a tool to keep track of and further oppress the Syrian society (De Angelis, 2011; Mejias, 2009; Moss, 2016). Therefore, in order for social media to be successful as a contributing factor in the peace and justice process, it is essential that Syrians are protected from its risks so social media can be used as a safe and effective tool by Syrians in working towards lasting peace and justice.

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## Appendix A

### Links to the excelsheet with micro-celebrities and Google docs with tweets

- Coding sheet of micro-celebrities -  
[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1KVw0qFdfFPf1Ag5zHzdUmVSPR\\_zNU5RA1Zf7W\\_HmTs/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1KVw0qFdfFPf1Ag5zHzdUmVSPR_zNU5RA1Zf7W_HmTs/edit?usp=sharing)
- Google docs with tweets on the Geneva peace talks -  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1I3e-iU9Lh6Ac2wcLVMGBI\\_8rtE4tPZHQJvAFot2VIP4/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1I3e-iU9Lh6Ac2wcLVMGBI_8rtE4tPZHQJvAFot2VIP4/edit?usp=sharing)
- Google docs with tweets on the Astana peace talks -  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MlieceyQa6\\_BlZH9RLrOd6eXX3xpg1dR40JZVtvpU\\_mao/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MlieceyQa6_BlZH9RLrOd6eXX3xpg1dR40JZVtvpU_mao/edit?usp=sharing)
- Google docs with tweets on the Koblenz trial -  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HKztJ1XT3wrpoz-4RtkKuZGAzyqG8M-jQDUflJoku10/edit?usp=sharing>
- Google docs with tweets on the Islam Alloush trial -  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kMwNloDemgxhAlp8TPZ8qPymbZrur8In3zSUPbRS\\_chM/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kMwNloDemgxhAlp8TPZ8qPymbZrur8In3zSUPbRS_chM/edit?usp=sharing)
- Google docs with the translated tweets used in this research -  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/11ReNu3h1j4XOzGaJ9yInhFbFrd6E\\_LPM0oCyNtNk8o0/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/11ReNu3h1j4XOzGaJ9yInhFbFrd6E_LPM0oCyNtNk8o0/edit?usp=sharing)

## Appendix B

### Overview of micro-celebrities' views on transitional justice and peace processes

- **Geneva peace process**
  - **Pro-opposition**
    - **View 1:** Do not negotiate with the regime
    - **View 2:** Criticism on the opposition delegation
    - **View 3:** Criticism on Staffan de Mistura (UN Special Envoy for Syria)
    - **View 4:** Without transitional justice, there is no sustainable peace
    - **View 5:** Positive about the Geneva peace process
    - **View 6:** The Geneva peace process does not take into account what is happening on the ground
    - **View 7:** The negotiations are between the international community rather than the Syrians
  - **Pro-regime**
    - **View 1:** Anti-Western/ Anti-US sentiment
    - **View 2:** The opposition are terrorists
- **Astana peace process**
  - **Pro-opposition**
    - **View 1:** Criticism on the opposition delegation
    - **View 2:** The Astana peace process only serves the interests of the Astana trio rather than that of the Syrians
    - **View 3:** Anti-Turkey stance
    - **View 4:** Positive about the Astana peace process
  - **Pro-regime**
    - **View 1:** The Astana peace process is better than the Geneva peace process and should therefore replace it
    - **View 2:** The opposition are terrorists
- **Koblenz trial**
  - **Pro-opposition**
    - **View 1:** The Koblenz trial is a start in holding the regime accountable
    - **View 2:** The Koblenz trial is a case of selective justice which deters defectors
    - **View 3:** The real perpetrators are not being held accountable
  - **Pro-regime**
    - **View 1:** Positive about the Koblenz trial because defectors are traitors
- **Islam Alloush trial**
  - **Pro-opposition**
    - **View 1:** Civil society organizations unjustly persecuted Majdi Nehme
    - **View 2:** The French government unjustly persecuted Majdi Nehme
    - **View 3:** It is unjust that Majdi Nehme is being persecuted and Rifaat Al-Assad is not
    - **View 4:** Dissidents are being criminalized
  - **Pro-regime**
    - **View 1:** Majdi Nehme is a terrorist and got what he deserved