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Perspectives of Syrians in the Diaspora on the Foundational Factors Contributing to the Assad Regime of State Repression (2000-2011)

Ribhi I. Salhi
Walden University

Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Ribhi I. Salhi

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Review Committee
Dr. Gerald Regier, Committee Chairperson,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Mi Young Lee, Committee Member,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Dr. Timothy Fadgen, University Reviewer,
Public Policy and Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

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MA, Northern Illinois University, 2001

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Researchers from different social science backgrounds have studied the various practices
of state repression but seldom acknowledge that state repression is a rival system between
the government regimes and their dissidents. However, rival systems can lead to
competing forces that will serve either the interest of the regime or their dissidents.
Researchers also have not often used the perspectives of opposition groups in the
diaspora to study state repression. Focusing on the rise and entrenchment of the Assad
regime in Syria (from 2000-2011), this study aimed to discover and explore the various
perspectives of Syrians in the United States about the state repression of the Assad
regime. Using the systems theoretical framework, this qualitative study contains three
levels of examination: the individual, the domestic, and the external. The study contained
15 participants. The data were collected through in-depth interviews via purposeful
sampling and analyzed with the modified van Kaam method. The results of the study
suggest the Syrian state repression has become a legacy of the continuation of the rival
system between the regime and dissidents. The regime successfully invested in the
national resources to oversight public loyalty, generate popular support, violate human
rights, and rely on external support for power survival. The Syrians in the U.S. diaspora
may benefit from the results of this study by engaging with various forms of American
civic engagement to generate regime reforms and prevent potential practices of state
repression in Syria leading to positive social change.

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Dedication

To my mother (1944-2021) who died on Feb 8, 2021, when I was working on the final part of my dissertation; to my father (1940-2000) who died on May 4, 2000, and my brother (1972-2009) who died on May 16, 2009. May the Lord bless their souls. Finally, to those who died after they stood up against tyranny and fought for liberty, justice, and mankind's dignity.

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My sincere thought goes first to the Lord who enabled me to finish this work during my four years at Walden where I have experienced several challenges related to my health, family, and my professional life.

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My fourth sincere appreciation goes to the study participants who provided me with additional knowledge to have a better understanding for state repression.

The last but not least, I am deeply grateful to my wife Jovi. Her support was extremely exceptional. If it were not because of her support, I would not be where I am now. I am extremely a blessed man. Thank you all.

Table of Contents

i

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

A repressive regime is one that violates rights of people and leads to human rights abuses (Aguilar & Kovras, 2019; Curtice & Arnon, 2019; DeMeritt, 2016; Goldstein, 1978; Henn & Klocek, 2017; Keels & Nichols, 2018; Truex, 2019). Repression and the violation of human rights have been the standard practices of autocratic regimes (Soest & Grauvogel, 2017; Tolstrup et al., 2018). Over the past 5 decades, the Middle East has seen the rise and fall of leaders, civil wars, increasing acts of internal terrorism, and enhanced practices of state repression (Lynch, 2012). The most notable instance of this strife has been in Syria.

Syria, previously referred to as Great Syria, was composed of the modern states of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine (Grainger, 2016). Historically, Syria is a nation that is part of the cradle of civilization and a host of several ancient civilizations such as Phoenicians, Assyrians, Greeks, and the Romans Empires. Since the end of WWII, Syria is surrounded geographically by Turkey in the north, Lebanon in the west, Iraq in the east, and Jordan and Israel to the south. The geographical boundaries of these nations were established as a result of the implementation of the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between the British and the French (Maddy-Weitzman, 2016). Cleveland (2004) indicated that the agreement divided the Middle East into a sphere of influence where the two powers gained direct control: France over Syria and Lebanon and Britain over Iraq and Transjordan. In this respect, I will argue that the colonial domination of post-WWI was a cause for internal Arab clashes in the postindependence eras.

Since its independence in 1946, the government in Syria has evolved through several stages of authoritarian-based leadership and has been considered by scholars of the Middle East a political riddle because of the continued violence and oppression, especially under the guidance of the Assad Regime (1970-2000; Azmeh, 2016; Mazur, 2018; McLauchlin, 2018; Mironova et al., 2019). State repression in Syria cannot be understood unless there is an examination of the autocratic regime of Hafez Assad, leader of the Assad Regime from 1970 to 2000, and the power of his political party, the Baath Party.

Scholars of governments have agreed that autocracies are found in more traditional cultures where religion, culture, and social norms support the regime's power in maintaining their foothold (O'Neil et al., 2018; Orvis & Drogus, 2012; Roskin et al., 2012; Siaroff, 2013). In Syria, the case is not much different. The Baath Party rose in prominence in Syria in the early 1960s (Lange, 2019). The primary leadership for the party was headed by Hafez Assad, born in 1930 into a poor Alawite peasant family (Ismael et al., 2016). As a ruler, he enforced policies of restrictive freedoms, including the punishment of those who opposed him by expulsion or restraint of government information (Sorenson, 2014). His death in June 2000 did not lead to an end of state repression, although his successor, the son Bashar, promised economic reforms, political expression, and new programs for modernization (Dostal, 2014; Lange, 2019). Unfortunately for some experts in Syria, the policies and practices of the father continued through the regime of his son, Bashar Assad, which has magnified punishments to those who oppose his efforts (Escriba-Folch, 2013; Halasa, 2012; Hinnebusch & Lesch, 2014;

Mahmoud et al., 2019). Bashar Assad's rise may not have been supported by many citizens of Syria, those in power –the military and the wealthy, the opposition in diaspora continues with their demands to reform Syria (Lynch et al., Aday, 2014; Martinez & Eng, 2018).

Syrians have been in diaspora for centuries (Jorum, 2015). To explain how this process began is impossible. It could be the nature of people to migrate and find better places to live, seek freedoms of liberty, justice, or just everyday religion, or in more modern times to escape the cruelty and oppression of political regimes. Syrians have been and continue to experience leaving their homeland to seek refuge in other countries, including the United States (Ostrand, 2018; Schon, 2019). Many of those are political dissidents who reside in other countries try to provide a link for information and possibly external leadership to create the overthrow of their governments, contain information not shared in the country by the government, and ultimately change their culture to meet modern needs (Fabbe et al., 2019; Ostrand, 2018).

This work examined the practices of the state repression of Bashar Assad's autocratic government. I attempted to explore the elements of autocracy that undergird oppression considering what scholars have examined about autocratic governments and state repression for more than a decade, especially through the Syrian scholars who currently are in diaspora in the United States.

This chapter includes background information on the development of the state repression in Syria. In this chapter, I also discuss the research problem and the purpose of the study; state the research questions; provide an overview of the theoretical framework;

and consider the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study along with its implications for social change. Finally, the chapter contains a definitional description for specific terms that will be used in various places in the study.

Background of the Study

The strategic use of repression suggests regime policies to counter an internal threat (DeMeritt, 2016). Of course, autocratic regimes are the champions of such use. This repression has many facets. It is characterized by growing repression of news/information sources, removal of dissenters, prohibiting the right to assemble, restraining of the freedom of expression, refusing to provide political accountability to the citizens, and violating civil liberties (Davenport & Inman, 2012; Roskin et al., 2012).

The reviewed literature for this study explained and analyzed the various practices of state repression generally. However, it did not fully explain the contribution of certain factors that authoritarian regimes use to serve their interests in state repression including the role of the domestic and the external environments. State repression is caused by and engenders domestic rivalry, opposition, and dissident activity, and is considered state-sponsored terror (Dekmejian, 2007; Martin, 2017). This violent response by government to opposition is also known as state terrorism (Dekmejian, 2007; Martin, 2017). This study investigated the role of the domestic and the external environments that served the interest of a regime using state repression and did so from the perspective of Syrian citizens who lived under the regime but are now in the diaspora. In the upcoming paragraphs, I will explain the evolutionary processes of the Assad regime state repression. In the end, I will state the needed reason for this study.

Beginning of Syrian Repression

Syria is not unique with such a practice of state repression and terrorism. The root of modern Syrian state repression began when the Baath Party captured power on March 8, 1963, through a bloodless military coup (Ismael et al., 2016). It increased further when Hafez Assad, the Minister of Defense, seized power and controlled the rest of the state in 1970 (Azmeh, 2016). It was the beginning of his repressive reign that did not end with his death in 2000 (Andersen et al., 2012).

To consolidate his power, Hafez Assad (1970-2000), the father of the current president, ruled the nation with an iron fist to prevent the rise of dissenters. There was absolute violence to maintain control of the various ethnic groups of Syrian society (Spindel, 2011). This violence included massive military campaigns in the cities of Aleppo and Hama where opposition groups launched a popular uprising against the Assad reign during the 1970s and early1980 (Andersen et al., 2012). The regime further kept practicing a preemptive repression that served the continuation of Assad authority until his death in June 2000 (Grainger, 2016; Rath, 2018). However, the regime invested in several public good programs to obtain political support and enhance political acquiescence. According to De Juan and Bank (2015), after Assad came to power in November 1970, his regime rewarded the various underdeveloped areas of the countryside with public programs including education, health services, and other life necessities. The regime rewards aimed at something in return, which was political loyalty among all the various ethnic and religious groups of Syria (Mazur, 2018; McLauchlin, 2018). The regime rewards system agrees was a version of patron-client relationships,

which assumes that leaders please their followers with all kinds of privileges in exchange for political loyalty and support (Drogus & Orvis, 2012). The Assad dictatorship not only provided the social services for the underdeveloped Syrian areas but also created universal secret police whose presence was as ubiquitous and brutal in its purge of dissenters (Grainger, 2016).

Syrian Tribal Designations

The Syrian tribal system has been the core of the Syrian society (Held, 2006; McLauchlin, 2018). Mazur (2018) pointed out that most of the population is Sunni Arabs, constituting roughly 72% of the population. The rest of the population is a combination of sectarian groups like Shiite Arabs, Alawites, Christian Aramaics, Kurds, Druse, Circassians, Armenians, Turks, various tribal Bedouins, and other minorities (Dukhan, 2019; Mazur, 2018; Palmer 2007). All these groups are interconnected to tribal backgrounds. The most influential group is the Alawites, which consists of 12% of Syrian society (Hinnebusch & Lesch, 2014). Arab nationalism is the primary concern of the Baath Party (Rogan, 2009). According to Lange (2019), the party denounced tribalism and considered it a social disease that must be fought to ensure a pure Arab nation-state. While the ruling elite belongs to the Alawites, the rest of the various groups have competed for regime favor and party loyalty (Grainger, 2016; Ismael et al., 2016; Lange, 2019; McLauchlin, 2018).

Typology of Assad Regime

The topology of the Assad regimes, for both father and son, contains three elements: the Baath Party, the state security forces, and the ruling elite (Dahi & Munif,

2012). Dahi and Munif (2012) explored the notion that the distribution of powers and the political alliance between these three social groups have enhanced the regime's absolute power and increased the economic and social grips from father to son. Therefore, the state has become an oligarchical republic whereby the citizens have turned out to be the regime's subjects, not the nation's citizens. French Jr. and Raven (1959) pointed to five bases of power: (a) reward power, (b) coercive power, (c) legitimate power, (d) referent power, and (e) expert power. In considering these bases of power to understand Assad power, the reward base generates political loyalty to the regime; the coercive base ensures the acquiescence to the regime; the legitimate base creates the acceptance of the regime; the referent base develops the feeling to follow the regime; and the expert base enables the regime to influence the loyal followers (French Jr. & Raven, 1959). These five bases have contributed to the practices of the Assad regime's state repression and undergirded its success during the reign of the father as well as the years of the latest civil war (Dahi & Munif, 2012; De Juan & Bank, 2014).

Syria's Single Party System

A single-party regime has governed Syria since 1963, the Arab Socialist Baath Party, a Pan-Arab nationalism group whose goal was to restore the Greater Syria (Azmeh, 2016; Tucker, 2013). It stands for the resurrection of the Arab World in one unified state based on Arab unity, Arab liberty, and Arab socialism (Roberts, 2015; Tucker, 2013). This party is considered a personalistic party based on the personality of a strong ruler (Roskin et al., 2012). The formation of the state, however, suggested that Syria was formed as a democratic republic in postindependence that took place because

of the end of the French colonial system in 1946 (Palmer, 2007; Tucker, 2013).

According to Palmer (2007), the state domestic conditions and the politics of the cold war

led the Syrian military in 1949 to remove the civilian government. The Syrian state

between 1949-1963 became a weak state due to the several military coups, fragile civilian

cabinets, influenced by the regional politics and the politics of the cold war; and it did not

stabilize until the Baath Party seized power in March 1963 (Dostal, 2014; Roberts, 2015).

The ideological foundation of the Baath Party that relies on nationalism and

socialism has dominated the politics of the Syrian state (Roberts, 2015; Tucker, 2013).

Palmer (2007) identified that the party had become the dominant force of all state

aspects, activities, bureaucrats, agencies, and the only mobilizer for national

indoctrination. The various ranks of the party members are the description for the Syrian

diverse ethnic groups, religious minorities, and the lower class of the Sunnis (Azmeh,

2016; Palmer, 2007; Roberts, 2015; Tucker, 2013). Therefore, the party has become an

entrance to the state, the society, the military, and way of life for those who seek to be

rewarded and not be marginalized nationally (Dukhan, 2019; Ismael et al., 2016). The

party, the ideology, and the personality are what made the foundation of Assad

legitimacy and the authoritarian regime (Lynch et al., 2014; Roberts, 2015). Soest and

Grauvogel (2017) indicated that the legitimacy base of an authoritarian regime is a

complex combination of foundational myth, ideology, and personalism that consisted of

charismatic authority and leadership. By considering this combination, the role of the

ruling party to integrate the aspects of the state under the personality of one charismatic

leader that used Arab nationalism and socialism generated the legitimacy of the

repressive rule that drove the political repression of the state (Dahi & Munif, 2012; De Juan & Bank, 2014; Dostal, 2014).

The Three Periods of the Baath Regime

To demonstrate a better understanding of the reign of the Syrian Baath Party, in conducting this project, the reign of the Baath Party is divided into three periods of Syrian political history. The first period marked the capturing of power through a military coup that took place on March 8, 1963. According to Hinnebusch and Lesch (2014), this period was characterized by the political rivalry of the military and the civilians of the Baath Party, resulting in the defeat of Syria in the Six-Days War of 1967 with Israel, which increased the gap of antagonism between the two forces. Also, Hinnebusch and Lesch indicated that the period was a "revolution from above" since its experienced land reforms, broke the economic monopoly of the oligarchy, won the peasants' support, and embraced the Soviet Union.

The second period started in November 1970 and remained until the death of Hafez Assad in June 2000. According to Ismael et al. (2016), the seizure of power by Hafez Assad was considered a "corrective movement" which led to sustaining the power of the military, a purge of old foes, and integrated the party, the state, and the military under autocratic leadership. This "corrective movement" helped Assad to gain additional political support from the Sunnis merchant class by repealing part of the policy of nationalization introduced in the late 1950s (Tabler, 2011).

The third period begins with the son, Bashar Assad, which started in July 2000. Gresh and Kristianasen (2000) argued that Bashar aimed to ensure the cohesion of his

minority Alawite community, maintain the regime's alliance with the Sunnis followers, empower his relationship with the army and intelligence services, and connect to the new youth who more closely connected to Bashar's generation as compared to the old guard of his father (Roberts, 2015). Hafez Assad had worked tirelessly to endorse Bashar nationally, thereby laying the groundwork for his son's future reign by those who were loyal and afraid to lose their social, political, and economic privileges (Gresh & Kristianasen, 2000). Licht and Allen (2018) argued that Bashar's preparation and endorsement by his father ensured the continuation of the Assad regime's repressive rule. In fact, in his inauguration, Bashar Assad indicated no intention to dismantle the idea of the single ruling party and emphasized the limits of the freedom of expression. The succession of Bashar Assad marked the transformation of Syria into a *jummrukiyya*, or family republic with a presidential monarchy style (Hinnebusch & Lesch, 2014). The goal of the heir's power in Syria was to maintain the reign of "*Assad autocracy*" and to protect the interest of the Alawite and the other beneficiaries of the Syrian regime (Dahi & Munif, 2012).

Considering the previous explanation, Bashar Assad's reign ensured the continuation of state repression and developed the tendency for popular resistance that created the Syrian opposition (Tan & Perudin, 2019). Thus, state repression in Syria is attributed to the fear of losing power and privilege to the opposition rival forces. The political struggle and the competition of power between the various Syrian national groups, including the Baathists, during the 1950s and 1960s, provide strong evidence for

such argument (Ismael et al., 2016). Understanding state repression is needed as a reason for future prevention that serves to protect human dignity.

Problem Statement

The problem for this study was that the Bashar Assad regime continues its state repression tactics despite the desire of Syrians in-country and in the diaspora, who are working to end it. The Syrian government is led by an autocratic regime that adopts repressive behaviors to ensure absolute power (Azmeh, 2016; Kassab, 2018; Rath, 2017). The absolute power has enhanced state repression, and it can be blamed for polarizing the nation between the regime and the opposition groups, known as the Syrian National Coalition (SNC; Duman, 2017; Martinez & Eng, 2018). This problem has negatively impacted the Syrian population by motivating some of the citizens to engage with violence against the regime (Dostal, 2014; Martinez & Eng, 2018). National polarization has caused a bloody civil war but failed to create a regime change (Lucas, 2016; Scartozzi, 2015).

Currently, the Syrian government has increased its repressive behavior to ensure its control and the defeat of the SNC. The Syrian state's repression emanates from weak civil society, tribal support, politicized domestic organizations, and the regime's external support, and is manifested in targeting civilians, rape, torture, dissenters disappearance, massive arrests, and restricting humanitarian assistance (Azmeh, 2016; Honari, 2018; Kassab, 2018; Leenders & Mansour, 2018; Martinez & Eng, 2018; McLauchlin, 2018; Smith et al., 2018).

None of the literature reviewed examined whether factors like the weak civil society, tribal support, the politicized domestic organizations, and the external support of the Assad regime contributed to state repression. More importantly, the reviewed literature, whether in general or in Syria, ignored that state repression generates a rival system between the authoritarian regime and the dissidents.

My study filled this gap by adding to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by providing data to public policy decision-makers around the world, more particularly in the Middle East, to formulate and or change policies on understanding the factors that make absolute rule that serves to promote state repression which in turn causes violent groups.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover, explore, and understand the various perspectives of a sample of Syrians in the United States diaspora about the reasons and conditions that they think continues to empower the Assad regime's practice of state repression. The perspective of the Syrian opposition living in the U.S. diaspora provided the road for the discovery and the exploration. Scholars of government have connected the practice of state repression to the authoritarian regimes who enjoy an absolute rule (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2019; Olar, 2019; Ritter & Conrad, 2016). The absolute rule is generally defined as the practice of repressive behavior of such a government both to ensure power survival and completely suppress political dissension (Chenoweth et al., 2017; Rivera, 2017). The Assad regime enjoys and sustains absolute rule (Scartozzi, 2015). The study obtained the perspective of selected members

of the Syrian community in the diaspora of the US to seek an explanation for the

continuation of the Assad leadership style and the surrounding societal actors of the

Syrian state to practice state repression.

Research Question

The research question for this qualitative case study was: What was the perception

of Syrians in the United States diaspora concerning the reasons and conditions that

continue to empower the Assad regime practice state repression?

Theoretical Framework

Grant and Osanloo (2014) explained that the theoretical framework is the

constructed foundation of the research study that structures and supports the rationale of

the study. The theoretical framework of this study is based on systems theory framework

(STF), which explains how the interconnection between the various parts of the system

influence the functionality of the system (Patton, 2015; Bridgen, 2017). According to

Patton and McMahon (2015), the STF is composed of several key interrelated systems,

including the intrapersonal system of the individual, the social system, and the

environmental-societal system. The STF is an outcome of the work of the general

systems theory.

The origination of general systems theory (GST) was from the works of Ludwig

Von Bertalanffy (1940-1971), who suggested that the theory is composed of constituent

parts (Von Bertalanffy, 1969). He theorized that the notion of the GST is the focus on the

interaction between the various parts of the functional system (mechanical; Von

Bertalanffy, 1968). Issitt (2018) expanded on Von Bertalanffy's notion of the GST by

suggesting that the parts, active within the system, eliminated the description of the external environment that also affects the system. This is an open system.

Modern researchers utilizing Bronfenbrenner's (1981) work on ecological system analysis created STF analysis. Bronfenbrenner's (1981) ecological system is like the idea of GST. His work contains the following: the microsystem, which includes the setting in which the individual lives, the mesosystem, which consists of the relationship between the individuals and systems, the exosystem, which consists of the experiences in another social setting, and the macrosystem, which explains the influence of the surrounding national and regional systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Patton and McMahon (2015) elaborated on the work of Bronfenbrenner by describing the intrapersonal system of the individual as a combination of the microsystem and the mesosystem; the social system relies on exosystem, and the environmental-societal system relies on macrosystem. The evolution of STF is useful in this research to analyze state repression through the perspectives of the Syrian opposition in diaspora.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study relied on a qualitative method with a case study design. The case study design contains extensive use of information, a preference for developing deep and rich information, and the consideration of the unique features of the case (O'Sullivan, et al., 2017) while also focusing on individuals, organizations, events, programs, or processes (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Also, as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016), the reasons for qualitative researchers to select qualitative interviews are central to reflect the naturalistic and interpretive values of the study. The rationale for

selecting a qualitative case study was that it offered rich information and useful data from in-depth interviews and would bring understanding of the role of the domestic and external environments that empower regime practices of state repression through the perspective of the Syrian activists who reside in the U.S.

Design of the Study

In this qualitative study, I have chosen to conduct in-depth interview with members of the Syrian Community who are part of the U.S. Diaspora. Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained that in-depth interviews provide the opportunity for the researcher to obtain detailed information and deep description for the interviewee's experiences. The purpose of this study required deep understanding and insight from persons who are familiar with and have lived under the Syrian repressive regime. Thus, the sample was selected purposefully from persons who have that experience of living in Syria under the Assad regime. Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that in purposeful sampling, participants are chosen to participate in the research for specific reasons including that they have a certain experience and knowledge. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to get the information needed for the inquiry's purpose and the primary questions of the study (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). I am familiar with a number of Syrians who are connected through Syrian diaspora organizations and meet the purpose and experience required for this study. Many I have met personally throughout my professional life and they were academic scholars, executive leaders, asylum seekers, and students. They represented the core of the interviewees.

Snowball sampling also was used to find additional participants (Patton, 2015) which meant the sample can be expanded through referrals provided by the interviewees. As I interviewed individuals, I asked them if they knew another person who met the purposeful criteria; if they did, I followed up with those additional persons until saturation was met.

Patton (2015) explained that saturation is achieved when nothing new is being learned. It is when one realizes that interviewing additional persons will most likely result in the same or similar answers to the questions being asked in the interview. Saturation was reached with 15 interviewees, particularly the interviews were in-depth so that deep understanding was obtained (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Each interview had open-ended questions which allowed each participant the freedom to respond and to choose further elaboration. I planned to conduct the interviews either by phone calls or face-to-face; however, because of COVID-19, I conducted eight phone interviews, one zoom interview, and six email interviews (explained in full details in Chapter 4). Finally, the design included the data analysis techniques of coding and categorization to themes and conclusion.

Methodology

Three common strategies for sampling in qualitative research are convenience sampling, purposeful sampling, and theoretical sampling (Marshall, 1996). Convenience sampling strategy aims to select the most accessible subject, purposeful sampling strategy focuses on subjects who are directly involved with the phenomenon of interest which make them the most productive sample to answer the research questions, and theoretical

sampling strategy refers to the theoretical sampling selection for building interpretative theories from the emerging data and selecting a new sample to examine and elaborate on the theory (Marshall, 1996; Patton, 2015).

I chose to use purposeful sampling for this study. Purposeful sampling refers to the individuals' selection to participate in a research project based on specific criteria such as their experience, knowledge, and location (Creswell, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2017; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The reason I used purposeful sampling was because my participants' locations were in the U.S. The population of this research study was originally thought to require seven to 10 participants; however, I needed to include 15 participants to reach the saturation. The participants were professional members of the Syrian community who lived in the United States. As I stated above, the size of this sample helped to reach saturation so that deep understanding was obtained.

Finally, the study relied on one possible source of data collection which was the individuals' interviews, where I interviewed 15 members of the Syrian Community who live in the US. The suggested plan for participants' interview was face-to-face; however, the data collection included other formats like phone calls, zoom, emails because of the global epidemic of COVID-19.

Definitions

The following terms are defined in line with how they were used in the study.

Repression: the act of subduing someone by institutional or physical forces (DeMeritt, 2016).

State repression: the actual or threatened use of physical sanctions against an individual or organization, within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, for the purpose of imposing a cost on the target as well as deterring specific activities and/or beliefs perceived to challenging to government personal, practices or institutions (Davenport & Inman, 2012)

Rogue state: a nation-state that supports terrorism, seeks of weapons of mass destruction, and causes a threat for the national interest of the U.S. (Litwak, 2000)

Terrorism: the strategic use of force or the threat of force, beyond the bounds of international law, against human and material targets carried out by any individual, subnational group, transnational organization, or state to achieve a political objective in pursuit of its perceived self-interest (Dekmejian, 2007).

State terrorism: violence from above carried by governments and their agents against civilians and others inside their countries or abroad to achieve political objectives (Lutz & Lutz, 2013).

Baathists: refers to the members who are affiliated with ideology of the Baath Arab Socialist Party (Ismael et al., 2016).

Personal dictatorship: refers to system of power based on the power of a single strong leader who usually relies on charismatic or traditional authority to maintain power (O'Neil, Fields, & Share, 2018).

Civil war: also known as the intrastate conflict in which there is armed conflict within a country between the central government and one or more insurgent groups. In

this case, the belligerents define themselves in part along cultural, ethnic, communal, and ideological lines (Kegley, Jr. & Raymond, 2014).

Internationalized civil war: refers to armed conflict between the central government of a country and insurgents with outside intervention by at least one other state in support of the insurgents (Kegley, Jr. & Raymond, 2014).

One-party rule: a nondemocratic system in which one political party dominates all government institutions (O'Neil, 2018).

Regime change: refers to a transition between democratic and nondemocratic forms of government (Drogus & Orvis, 2012).

Civil society: the collection of organizations outside of the state that help people define and advance their interests (O'Neil et al. 2018).

Patron-client relationships: a term used to explain how the top leaders (patrons) mobilize political support by providing a resource to their followers (clients) in exchange for political loyalty (Drogus & Orvis, 2012).

Dissent Movement: refers to nonstate actors within a country that challenge and impose a cost on the ruling entity to change the national status quo, which in return incentivizes the governments to response repressively (Ritter & Conard, 2016).

Syrian Diaspora: refers to Syrian activists who live abroad and have made the decision to openly criticize the Syrian regime (Jorum, 2015).

Assumptions

Rudestam and Newton (2015) asserted that the research process demands knowledge by description and by acquaintance. Knowledge by description requires

reading, while knowledge by acquaintance involves engagement. This could be explained

first, as a researcher, I needed to apply clear and logical thinking to work with theories of

personal dictatorship and state repression and next, I engaged with the practical

application of ideas, data collections, and analysis. In qualitative research, Creswell

(2014) explained that the process of research involves questions, procedures, data

collection, data analysis, researcher's interpretation of the meaning of the data. Therefore,

my first assumption was that the framework I chose would provide an accurate

explanation for the practices of state repression of the Bashar Assad regime and explored

the factors that have contributed to its survival. The second assumption suggested that the

collected data, in-depth interviews, was interpreted by me to explain this phenomenon of

interest, to overcome the literature gap, and to contribute new knowledge for the

literature of state repression and the authoritarian regimes. The two assumptions

suggested a systematic personal engagement, as Patton (2015) suggested.

Scope and Delimitations

The rationale for selecting some members of the Syrians Community in the U.S.

diaspora was their experience of state repression when they lived in Syria. They

experienced the reign of the son and the father before. They were knowledgeable about

the Syrian society, politics, and government. In fact, the members of this community

were highly educated and politically united to bring a positive change for their homeland.

Their background goes to several generations in Syrian politics. The initial target for the

sample was seven to 10 participants. Since saturation was not met after interviewing 10

individuals, I continued recruiting additional participants through snowball sampling.

Fortunately, I reached saturation after I targeted 15 participants.

Limitations

The first limitation was a technical one: I expected some difficulties of recruiting

participants for this study. Those Syrians who live in the United States may live in fear

and worry about their families still living in Syria. They may consider their participation

burden and risky; therefore, they might not provide enough data because of such fears.

The second limitation was a geographical one. The study provided the perspectives and

the experience for those who live in the United States diaspora. The study did not include

other Syrians who live elsewhere in the world whether they were refugees or citizens of

other nations. These two limitations presented challenges where I had to struggle to

ensure first safety for my participants and second to be more open for participants if I had

the chance to recruit more.

Significance of the Study

This research study aimed to fill a gap in understanding by focusing on the role of

the domestic and international environments that contributed to the foundation of the

absolute rule of the Assad regime in Syria from the perspective of the Syrians in the U.S.

Diaspora. This was significant in that it would address why there was some popular

support for the Assad regime in making the Syrian state repression (McLauchlin, 2018)

and how much support served to enhance the Syrian state repression. Insights of this

study may be used by scholars of government in understanding the creation of the

autocratic regime and how this creation can polarize the nation between regime

supporters and opposition advocates. Such an understanding will serve to create a positive social change by creating an awareness plan to prevent the creation of potential such a system.

Summary

In this chapter, I intended to highlight the entrance of my dissertation. The chapter explained how state repression has been evolved in Syria for the last 5 decades. To gain a better understanding, I used the STF, which consists of three levels (individual, societal, and the external environment). The main question of this study aimed to explore the perspectives of the Syrian in the U.S. diaspora about the practice of the Assad regime for state repression. This study was qualitative. It used the method of data collection through in-depth interviews. In the next chapter, I focus on the gap in the literature by demonstrating how other researchers have researched the practices of state repression.

In this respect, I argue that state repression, whether it is practiced preemptively or responsively, is an outcome of the rival system between dissenters and the authoritarian regime. I move after that to Chapter 3, where I provide a detailed description of the study design, including sample size, methods of collection, and analysis. In Chapter 4, I present the result of the study, and I end finally in Chapter 5, where I will state my reflection for social change and provide recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Despite Syrian efforts, both in the country and in the diaspora, to end the Bashar Assad regime, a problem exists in that research has yet to clearly define the factors that are allowing the state repression tactics to continue. The Syrian government is led by an autocratic regime that adopts repressive behavior to ensure absolute power (Azmeh, 2016; Kassab, 2018; Rath, 2017). This absolute power has enhanced state repression and can be blamed for the nation's polarizing split between the regime and the opposition groups, known as the SNC (Duman, 2017; Martinez & Eng, 2018). National polarization has caused a bloody civil war but has failed to create a regime change (Lucas, 2016; Scartozzi, 2015).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover and explore the various perspectives of the Syrians in the U.S. diaspora about the reasons and conditions that empower the Assad regime's practice of state repression. The perspective of the Syrian opposition living in the diaspora, particularly those who reside in the United States, provided the road for discovery and exploration into an authoritarian government and its use of state repression, while the work of political scientists will develop an understanding of how state repression by authoritarian regimes is applied to Syria during the Bashar Assad regime (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2019; Olar, 2019; Ritter & Conrad, 2016).

Literature Establishing the Relevance of the Problem

The following section will establish the relevance of the problem by providing a

concise synopsis of the current literature surrounding state repression. The inherited

authoritarian system is characteristic of the current state repression in Syria (Lucas,

2016). This repression is rooted in the early 1970s, when Bashar's father, Hafez Assad,

captured power and seized the country with an iron fist to ensure the absolute rule of his

regime (Lynch et al., 2014; Mazur, 2018). The elder Assad's death in 2000 and the

subsequent transfer of his reign to his son Bashar in June 2000 ensured the continuation

of absolute rule and the practice of the regime's repressive behavior (Perra, 2016).

While the shift in power from father to son indicated a potential relaxation in

regime behavior, the son's regime has shown otherwise (Leenders & Mansour, 2018;

Lucas, 2016). The foundational factors of state repression have not been addressed

clearly, nor has it been sufficiently explained that this state repression is an outcome of

the rival system between the regime and its opponents. The foundation of the rival system

represents the collection of fears and demands that dominates the relationship between

the government and the opposition groups (Ritter & Conard, 2016). During the father's

reign, the popular mobilization was driven for the regime advantage since an iron fist

controlled the opposition groups and politicized the society (Mohamed et al., 2019; Tan

& Perudin, 2019; Zuhur, 2015). However, the death of the father showed the inherited

authoritarian system could maintain the previous regime's absolute power, ensuring

national domination through repressive behavior and by suppressing the demands of

opposition groups (Scartozzi, 2015; Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, establishing relevance is characterized by three dimensions.

First, state repression is another form of state terror, and state violence is a means to ensuring national domination, secure regime interest, and the termination of the opposition group's challenges. Second, the regime's repressive behavior was determined and shaped by a combination of factors that are associated with individual, domestic, and international levels that politically, militarily, and sociologically served for the advantage of the authoritarian regime. The reviewed literature did not use the all three levels to examine state repression across the world, instead, they addressed one level or two levels for their examinations of state repression (Bak et al., 2019; Barcelo, 2018; Christensen, 2017; Coynash & Charron, 2019; Dragu & Lupu, 2017; Fruge, 2019; Hendrix & Salehyan, 2019; House, 2017; Ives & Lewis, 2019; Olar, 2019; Ryckman, 2019; Salehyan & Stewart, 2016; Slantchev & Matush, 2019; Tolstrup et al., 2018; Truex, 2019; Wright & Moorthy, 2018; Yuen & Cheng, 2017). In this respect, then, state repression has not been fully studied in the literature. Third, and most importantly, these neglected interactions could provide the framework to discuss the various factors that contribute to the practice of state repression. This is the reason and the rationale for selecting the STF. It is composed of a framework of interaction between the system of individual factors, the system of domestic factors, and the system of the external environmental factors (Donnelly, 2019; Patton & McMahon, 2015; Patton, 2015). Therefore, the STF provides a firm foundation for analyzing the regime practice of state repression in Syria.

Preview of the Chapter

In this chapter, I discuss my literature search strategy, including resources and key terms. I present the theoretical foundation of the study to show my understanding, exploration, and analysis of the Syrian state's repression, as well as to demonstrate the appropriateness of my selected theoretical framework for analyzing the reasons and conditions that contributed to the system of repression of the Syrian state. I have extensively covered the various utilization of state repression by reviewing several qualitative and quantitative studies from several disciplines including history, political science, sociology, and psychology. I intend, through this work, to identify and then fill the gaps in the research by adding new knowledge to the literature of state repression. Finally, I end the chapter with a brief summary and conclusion.

<center>**Literature Search Strategy**</center>

The Walden University Library offers excellent tools for research. It also provides exceptional learning resources to develop a search strategy. One of these resources was the updated webinars to learn about the mysteries of library research and scholarly writing. Another learning resource was the published dissertations of Walden students, particularly the qualitative studies. The third learning resource that contributed to the search strategy was my contact with Walden librarians, during my residencies or via emails and phone calls, who provided excellent professional service to guide my research interest. My ultimate resource was my professional library, my at-home political science library built through my educational career and research interests in government and violence.

List of Research Sources

In considering the tools for search strategy, I have used through Walden ProQuest Central, Eric, SageJournals, EBSCOhost, Political Science Complete, and GoogleScholar. Also, several books were used, online and physical copies. Using these resources, I was able to explore a variety of theories and scholarly works. The time for the search was within the range of 2015-2020; however, I searched beyond this range to expand a specific background for some of the used theories.

List of Key Search Terms

My search contained several terms and theories from several disciplines, like political science and sociology. I have intensely focused the search strategy on several key terms including *repression, state repression, political repression, state terror, terrorism, state violence, civil war, civil protest, Syrian uprising, single-party regime, autocracy, authoritarian regimes, Syrian government, Assad regime,* and *dissent.*

Description of the Iterative Search Process

The ongoing search in the literature led to many scholarly articles and books discussing the various theories of authoritarian regimes and their repressive rules. Some of these sources provided an excellent understanding of the multiple utilizations of state repression with surrounding conditions that, on the one hand, helped the regimes to survive the dissident challenges. On the other hand, there was a better understanding of how the surrounding conditions served to inflame the dissidents. These two areas of discovery—regime repression and dissident inflammation—were useful in identifying the gaps in previous research. Therefore, it can be concluded that repressive regime behavior

and the inflammation of dissidents reflect a relationship of a rival system between both. This system of rivalry, particularly in Syria, resulted in a civil war and/or a bloody civil riot throughout other nations.

The literature also suggests that state repression can be categorized based on the nature of the utilization of repression. Indeed, the search journey suggested that state repression was used to describe ethnic conflict and assimilation, civil protests, wars of national liberation, and preemptive attempts to prevent concession with dissidents. In many cases, best practices for state repression were in ethnic conflict and civil protests, which sustained the notion of state violence.

It became clear that understanding state repression and how it drove dissidents to become violent helped recognize that, as suggested by Davenport (2007), state repression was a "Law of Coercive Responsiveness" (p. 7) and can be a "double-edged sword" (p. 181) serving to suppress and inflame dissenters (Goldstone & Tilly, 2009). Consequently, the history of the struggle for power in Syria provides an understanding of the relationship between both Assad regimes and the dissidents. The elite of Syria's Baath party, the single-dominant party since 1963, successfully consolidated the state, the society, and the military into one autocratic regime that practiced a repressive rule to silence the opposition groups (Davies, 2017). Due to 50 years of repression, the opposition groups were mobilized for violence, particularly in 2011, and for regime change, driving the nation into an internationalized civil war (Davies, 2017).

Theoretical Foundation

A good approach for selecting a theoretical framework is the study of a scholarly journal that requires the authors to identify the theoretical framework used (Anfara Jr., 2008). Indeed, journal articles in public administration and political science have a similar pattern in which I could see a theoretical framework articulated, ideas put forth, and then defended or tested using evidence (Laureate Education, 2014). Also, Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that theoretical framework refers to "the ways that a researcher integrates and situates the formal theories that contextualize and guide a study" (p. 86). Inspired by the explanation from Ravitch and Carl (2016), the theoretical foundation for this study is based on the systems theoretical framework (STF) model. More theories of power are used to support each part of the STF. Systems theoretical framework (STF) is a holistic, interdisciplinary model that embraces a continuum of micro to macro characteristics, providing a roadmap to understand the influence of each level of the system (McMahon et al., 2015; Patton & McMahon, 2015). The early roots of the STF rely on the initial work of Bertalanffy (1954), the general systems theory (Issitt, 2018). Bronfenbrenner (1981) enhanced General Systems Theory to include the ecological system, ultimately becoming the STF. He designed the model to include six rings. These are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, super mesosystem, national macrosystem, and international macrosystem (See Figure 1; Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System

Figure 1 Bronfenbrenner (1981) Ecological System

International macrosystem

National macrosystem

mesosystem

Exosystem

Mesosystem

Microsystem
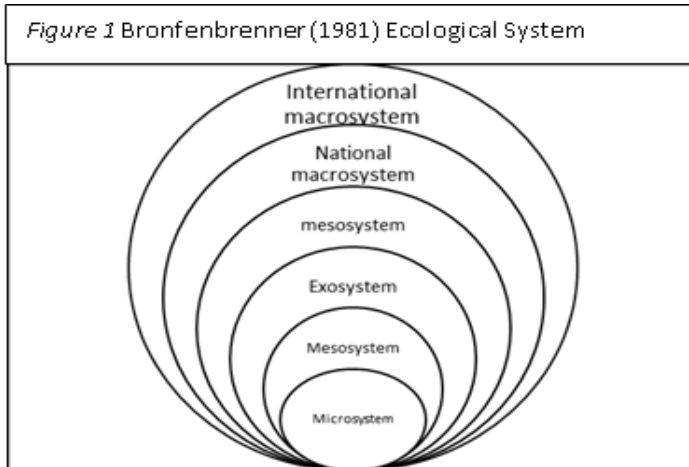
Note. Adapted from "Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory," by O. Guy-Evans, 2020, *Simply Psychology*, (https://www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner.html).

More recently, Patton and McMahon (2015), based on the work of Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg (1986), illustrated the use of the STF by examining the model applied to career decision-makers with a range of personal characteristics and further modified Bronfenbrenner's ecological system to consolidate several of the rings. Patton and McMahon (2015) elaborated on the work of Bronfenbrenner by describing the intrapersonal system of the individual as a combination of the microsystem and the mesosystem; the social system relies on the exosystem, and the environmental-societal system relies on the macrosystem (See Figure 2).

Figure 2

Patton & McMahon (2015) The Systems Theory Framework
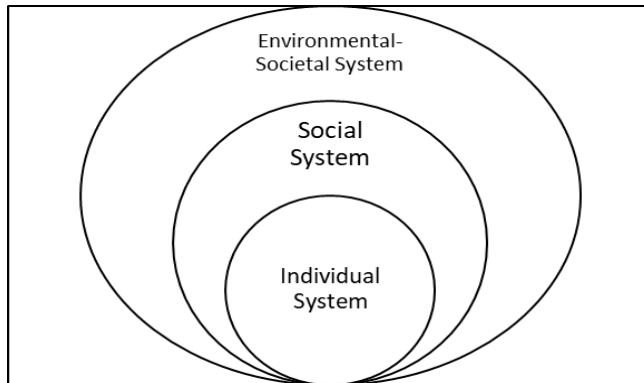
Note. Adapted from "The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development: 20 Years of Contribution of Theory and Practice," by W. Patton, M. McMahon, 2015, *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 24(3),.143. (https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416215579944).

This evolutionary work agrees with Patton (2015), that systems theory is about the inquiry of how and why the system functions in a certain way, what the system's boundaries and interrelationships are, and how these affect the function of the system. Once the study relies on systems theory as a framework, researchers will be able to understand the wholeness of the scientific and social problems (Bridgen, 2017).

According to Anfara Jr. (2008), a good selection for a theoretical framework can make the study more focused, reveal the meaning of the study, and reveal its strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, this developed the rationale of my selection of the STF. The evolution of the STF was useful in this research to analyze state repression through the perspectives of the Syrian opposition in diaspora. Below is a further explanation for how the STF was modified and utilized for this study.

Description of the Modified Systems Theoretical Framework

Carrying the scholarly work for the systems theory further, this study seeks to combine the practices of STF theorists by redesigning Bronfenbrenner's (1981) model to resemble the work of this project. This includes the consolidation of this model to include the individual system level, the social system level, and the external system level. To be more specific, the micro-level translated to the individual level, the meso-level converted to the societal institutions, and macro-level translated to the external entities, including regional-global environment.

Generally, the individual level includes the individual socialization and leadership style. The societal institutions level includes the domestic actors, such as tribal assemblies, government agencies, the party system, and dissident-advocate groups. The regional-global environment level includes foreign support.

Figure 3

Systems Theoretical Framework

Figure 3 Systems Theoretical Framework (STF)

Individual System (Individual-family socialization & Leadership style)
Societal System (tribal assemblies, government agencies, party affiliation, regime advocates, dissent movements)
External System (foreign support)
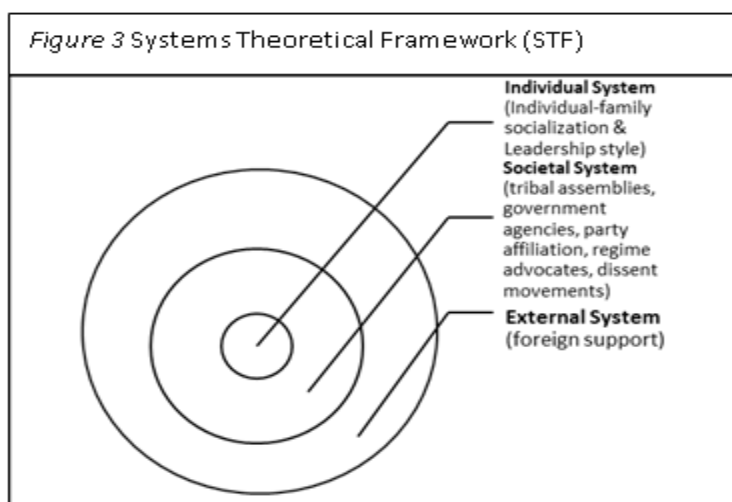
Note. Adapted from Author Personal Creation 2021

Considering this explanation, the modified STF model was applied to the Assad regime of Syria during the years of 2000-2011. This work focused on exploring the foundational factors that contributed to the practice of the Syrian state's repression. Each of the modified levels is discussed through a specific theoretical approach and how the repressive techniques are exemplified. The next paragraphs represent a theoretical explanation for the use of each level of the model (See figure 3).

The Individual System Level

Bashar Assad, the current president of Syria, was raised in a strict household that traditionally held to the dominant culture of his Alawite tribe (Durac & Cavatorta, 2015). To understand the individual system level, there is one theory used to explain Bashar's individual personality and two theories to explain his leadership style. The first theory is the symbolic interaction theory by George Herbert Mead (1934), which explains Bashar's socialized individual personality, and the other two theories are used to explain the leadership style, the path-goal theory, and the expectancy theory (Northouse, 2016).

Application of Theory to Individual-Family Socialization. To begin with Bashar's individual personality, George Herbert Mead's (1934) symbolic interaction theory indicated that we are all a product of our families, friends, advisors, and the experiences that contribute to who we are in the "Social Self" or the presentation of the person, their decision-making and their attitudes toward others, including government, individuals, and groups. Hafez Assad, Bashar's father and the Syrian president from 1970-2000, raised his son in an environment in which he was exposed to the decision-making process of autocratic rule, and witnessed the elder Assad's ability to quell

dissidents to his regime (Durac & Cavatorta, 2015; Pratt, 2007). Hafez Assad was known

to have dissidents to his style of government lost, tortured, or killed (Dawisha, 2013;

Siaroff, 2013). Many were known to leave the country for survival, while their families

were prohibited from growing and gaining a foothold politically or financially (Dawisha,

2013). Being exposed to these traditions throughout his childhood left Bashar with a

sense of awareness as to what the leadership of Syria meant under the direction of his

father.

Having been exposed to an authoritarian personality and behaviors through his

father the stage was set for Bashar to develop authoritarian behaviors and personality

characteristics similar to those of his father (Durac & Cavatorta, 2015). This is the

important groundwork that allowed Bashar to control the advisors and the tribal hierarchy

which sustained his father's rise to power and rule as well as his own. Indeed, Bashar

became a product of the socialized environment that shaped his individual personality

into autocracy.

Application of Theory to Leadership Style. Leadership style generally is

derived through socialization and those around us (Stogdill, 1948). According to

Northouse (2016), "leadership is a process whereby an individual influence a group of

individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6). Two theories could help understand the

leadership style of Bashar Assad: the path-goal theory and expectancy theory. According

to Northouse (2016), the path-goal theory explains how leaders motivate followers to

accomplish designated goals. Northouse (2016) asserted that the stated goal of path-goal

theory leadership is to enhance followers' performance and satisfaction by focusing on

their motivation. The second leadership theory, expectancy theory, assumes that followers will be motivated if they think they are capable of performing their work and they will be rewarded for their accomplishment (Northouse, 2016); therefore, the path-goal theory requires leaders to find out what is rewarding to followers about their work and then make those rewards available to them when they accomplish their work (Northouse, 2016; Vandegrift & Matusitz, 2011; Walter & Scheibe, 2013).

Like his father, Bashar Assad also adopted a coercive leadership, described by Northouse (2016) as the process of using force to influence others to do certain things. Bashar designed the national goals and motivated his followers for performance and achievement through rewarding them with high-ranking positions in government, in the party, in society, and in the military. This style ensured his followers' support and engagement in repressive behavior.

The Societal System Level

This level contains the organized social groups of the Syrian state: the tribal assemblies, government agencies, party affiliation, regime advocates, and the dissent movements. There are two theories used to explain the interaction within this level. The first one is Mintzberg's (1983) theory, the organizational theory of power, and the second one is Tilly's (1978) resource mobilization theory. The explanation is as follows:

Mintzberg (1983) argued that the organization first comes into being when an initial group of influencers joins together to pursue a joint mission. Therefore, power is built on the premise that organizational behavior is that in which various players, influencers, seek to control the organization's decisions and actions (Mintzberg, 1983).

Mintzberg (1983) also asserted that each organization has influencers who want to use their lever of power to control decisions and actions. To ensure influencers' success in power function, three prime bases are needed: (a) resources control, (b) technical skills, and (c) body of knowledge (Mintzberg, 1983).

Tilly (1978) indicated that the collective action of the resource mobilization theory was a combination of four factors: (a) interest in which the members of a group share the same needs, (b) organization in which the group is united with identity, (c) mobilization which indicates that the members of the group control specific resources that give them the capability of pursuing joint goals, and (d) opportunity which involves the relationship between the group's interests and the surrounding environment. Indeed, Mintzberg's (1983) and Tilly's (1978) theories helped explain the organizational foundation and the struggle for power of the tribal assemblies, government agencies, party affiliation, regime advocates, and the dissents movements.

Application of Theory of the Societal Groups. First, in considering Mintzberg's (1983) organizational power theory, the societal players of the Syrian state have been shaped organizationally to ensure the designed goal for each group. The Alawite tribe, led by the elite, "the influencers," control the highest positions in government, military, and the party. These influences, therefore, enjoy the monopoly of the decisions and actions since they manage the state resources, possess a high level of technical skill, and have a strong knowledge about national affairs. As a result of such an organization, an opportunity is created to provide the regime with an unquestionable mechanism to sustain

the function of repression. This is an explanation for the inherited authoritarian rule in Syria, from father to son.

Second, in considering a broader explanation for the societal groups based on Tilly's (1978) resource mobilization theory, these groups (tribal assemblies, government agencies, party affiliation, regime advocates, and dissent movements) and the four factors (interest, organization, mobilization, and opportunity) explained the foundation, the behavior, the goal, and the mission of each group. The Alawite tribe, for example, aimed to be the ruling elite of the state; therefore, the Baath Party was the organization that allowed them to control the resources, the military, and the government, which provided the opportunity to rule the nation. Similarly, with the dissidents as another example, the four factors made a good explanation as to why the dissidents turned against the regime and engaged in the violence that led to the current Syrian civil war. Because of the repressive regime, the dissidents' interest, historically, has been to drive out the Assad regime (the father and then the son); therefore, the creation of their organized opposition groups, internally and externally, became the organization that aimed to mobilize the public against the regime, particularly when power was transferred to Bashar after the death of his father, as he then represented the tribal-family transformation of the authoritarian rule. Indeed, applying the theories of Mintzberg (1983) and Tilly (1978) suggested a good framework for understanding the interaction of the societal groups.

The External System Level

This level contains the foreign involvement that offers support for the Syrian regime, more particularly which explains the interest of both Iran and Russia in

supporting the Assad regime. One theoretical approach to explain such involvement is the

theory of power in international politics; more notably, though, is the realist approach in

politics that defines the national interest of the state. Realism in international politics

assumes that power represents the national interest of the country. Power is divided into

types: hard and soft (Nye Jr., 2002; Yenigun, 2016). While hard power refers to the use

of military resources, the soft power refers to the use of diplomatic and economic

support to advance the national interests, in turn ensuring the goals of security and

hegemony (Art & Jervis, 2009; Daddow, 2013; Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2009; Kegley, Jr.

& Raymond, 2014; Kaufman, 2013; Kolodziej, 2005; Morgenthau, 1946; Nye Jr., 2002;

Yenigun, 2016).

      Application of the Theory of Foreign Support. By taking the realist approach

for the theory of power in international politics, the external involvement with the Syrian

regime is represented in the national interest of both Iran and Russia in Syria. In the

modern politics of Russia, Putin sought to restore Russian influence in the Middle East

(Dajani et al., 2019; Perra, 2016). One of the entrances in the Middle is Syria. The

relationship between the Assad regime and Putin suggests arms deals, diplomatic support,

and joint military ventures to fight Assad opposition groups (Freedman, 2018; Perra,

2016; Roberts, 2017; Unnikrishnan & Purushothaman, 2017). Iran's support to Assad, on

the other hand, was motivated by the fears that Syrian opposition groups were clients for

hostile powers to Tehran, like the US and Saudi Arabia. It was a strategic decision to

support Assad since Syria would remain a perpetual client for Iran (Hetou, 2019; Tan &

Perudin, 2019). While Russian support to the Assad regime aimed to achieve Moscow's

global and regional interests, the Iranian support aimed to ensure Tehran's ideological and

regional interests. The Russian and the Iranian involvement served the national interests

for both by preventing a regime change in Syria and empowering Assad before

dissidents, who were clients for hostile powers for both Moscow and Tehran, could gain

any control (Hetou, 2019; Koizumi, 2019; Tan & Perudin, 2019).

In sum, the three parts of the modified STF generated a roadmap to better

understand state repression by considering a combination of the interaction between the

factors of the individual, societal, and external systems. After that, it became safe to

argue that the foundational factors that contribute to Syrian state repression were

characterized by individual-family socialization, leadership efficiency, politicized and

organized domestic groups that ensured mobilization and loyalty, the fears of the

dissidents, and, finally, the outsiders' interests in the Assad regime which served to

prevent a regime change during the uprising and the current civil war. These systems

worked to the advantage of the regime and created legitimacy in leadership and

repression. This is also consistent with Soest and Grauvogel's (2017) assertions about

legitimizing the authoritarian regime. Authoritarian legitimacy relies on six bases. These

are: (a) foundational solidarity (b) ideology, (c) charismatic personality, (d) procedures,

(e) performance, and (f) international engagement (Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). More

importantly, the explored foundational factors served to evolve the Syrian authoritarian

regime into a personalist dictatorship. Franz (2016) explained that in a personalist

dictatorship, the leader practices brutal repressive behavior without being checked by

other actors. Clearly, the Bashar regime is a system of dictatorship structured by tribal

support that dominates the state, the society, the government resources, and mobilizes

advocates for regime support (De Juan & Bank, 2014).

Relationship of Theory to the Present Study

The focus of this study was to discover and explore the perspectives of Syrians in

the United States diaspora about the reasons and conditions that empower the Assad

regime practice of state repression. Since the authoritarian system is an organizational

regime, the modification and the utilization of the STF became the right model to explore

the various contributed factors. While the reviewed literature covers the study of state

repression from one area, either the regime itself or the dissent movements, or a brief

look at the two combined, the STF provides a comprehensive approach to studying state

repression by combining the regime, the societal, and the surrounding environment

systems. Such a combination has led me to explore additional factors that to some extent

associated with individual social background and individual leadership style, and to

acknowledge that state repression is generated because of the rival system between the

regime and the dissidents. Therefore, the rival system invites both the domestic and

external environments either to help the regime to repress the dissidents, which could

inflame them more or help the dissidents to force a regime change. Either way, the

utilized model of the STF was an excellent model to understand how state repression is

generated, shaped, invested, empowered, and works to the advantage or disadvantage of

the conflicting parties. Such an understanding of the relationship between the current

study and the selected theories agrees with the theorists of the systems theory.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In this section, I focus on several scholarly explanations for the understanding and the practices of state repression and how this led to creating violent dissenters. I argue that state repression is an outcome of the authoritarian system in which its practice contributes to the creation of violent dissenters. Organized political dissidents pose a threat to the rule of authoritarian regimes, which make the regimes resort to brutal repression to maintain their rule (Osorio et al., 2018). Naturally, dissent occurs when nonstate actors within the state challenge and impose a cost on the ruling entity to change the national status quo, which in return incentivizes the governments to respond repressively (Ritter & Conard, 2016). The following provides the literature reviewed relative to key concepts. I reviewed 57 studies, all published between 2015-2020, that discussed state repression, and my research interest focused on either the repressive regimes or the dissidents or both. In the next section, I first give a general explanation for understanding state repression; second, I discuss the reviewed literature.

General Explanation for State Repression

State repression is a natural practice of authoritarian regimes (Greitens, 2016). It is referred to by most researchers as human rights abuse and is utilized to quell popular dissent movements (Aguilar & Kovras, 2019; DeMeritt, 2016; Licht & Allen, 2018; Truex, 2019; Wright & Moorthy, 2018). It offers regimes a tool for suppressing public dissenters and those who believe that governments care little about their citizens, which, in turn, can further inflame the dissent movements (Christensen, 2017). Historically, as demonstrated in the former Soviet Union and its satellite regimes, repression was the

mechanism to maintain regime power and sustain national integrity (Slantchev & Matush, 2019). Once authoritarian regimes experience a massive popular protest, they are forced to react violently since they want to preserve power (Thomson, 2016; Tolstrup et al., 2018; Young, 2020).

Repression generates some benefits for the regime (DeMeritt, 2016; Dragu, 2017). It can reduce the mobilization of the opposition, raising the cost of protesting and deterring potential challengers to the regimes (Dragu & Lupu, 2017). Scholars who have studied state repression consider it a repressive regime behavior since it violates the simple rights of people and often leads to human rights abuse (Aviles & Celis, 2017; Davenport & Inman, 2012; DeMeritt, 2016; Coynash & Charron, 2019; Goldstein, 1978; Keels & Nichols, 2018; Reglime Jr., 2018; Wintrobe, 1998; Wright & Moorthy, 2018).

I have categorized state repression as another form of state terror since the practices aim to advance the political interests of the regime by using the act of violence and intimidation. State terror is created since the authoritarian regimes expect to consolidate their power, suppress their internal enemies, ensure national stability, and secure their regime interests (Scharpf, 2018).

State repression is the outcome of state terror. It refers to a government's policies to limit the freedom of its citizens to express discontent and to impose a cost upon those who do (Licht & Allen, 2018). It assumes that the state is strong enough to carry out the coercive behavior of the regime (Zhukov & Talibova, 2018). State repression can be both overt and covert actions. Sullivan and Davenport (2018) characterized overt repression as

government raids, arrests, and targeted assassination, while covert repression includes government monitoring, agent provocateurs, and wiretapping.

In the following section, I show how political scientists, sociologists, historians, and psychologists discuss state repression. While the work is fascinating, as previously explained, more work is needed to better understand state repression, and therein lies the goal of this study. Additionally, I seek to categorize the various practices of state repression to create a focused understanding for each practice.

Description of Related Studies

The next paragraphs show several categories of the utilization of state repression. The level of practice, the goal, the foundation, and the impact are described.

Preemptive Repression

State repression is a tool for new leaders to show strength and to deter a threat. Licht and Allen (2018) studied how new leaders, those who are heirs to power, invested in state repression for reputation-building. Such investments help these leaders prevent potential challenges, avoid concessions, and weaken the dissidents to prevent future uprisings. Therefore, the value of the reputation is to create a perception for the dissidents that there is a high cost if they ever present challenges to the regime. Curtice and Arnon (2019) studied both failed and successful coups, concluding that, in post-coup regimes, coup survival or the successful carrying out of the coup requires preemptive repression to deter the potential threat from those excluded from power. The regimes will likewise seek further control of known political opponents to ensure they will not present future challenges (Curtice & Arnon, 2019).

A preemptive state repression practice ensures no potential challenges for the autocratic regimes. Truex (2019) studied the possibility of preemptive repression. He asserted that preemptive repression had many forms like curfews, assembly prohibition, and crackdowns on dissidents (Truex, 2019). By adopting such practices, the authoritarian regimes could successfully prevent the expansion of the dissent that would eventually lead to their termination and thereby maintain their regime's survival (Truex, 2019).

In a different study of preemptive repression, De Jaegher and Hoyer (2019) examined the effectiveness of preemptive state repression on dissenters by utilizing game theory. The study aimed to investigate the strategic interaction between the government and the dissent movement. The preemptive repression relied on two strategies. The first was the iron-fist strategy, which was assumed to deter dissidents; the second was the velvet-glove strategy which considered the possibility that the dissent movement would backfire (De Jaegher & Hoyer, 2019). The study concluded with the suggestion that whether dissent was deterred or backfired was determined by the government's level of investment in preemptive repression (De Jaegher & Hoyer, 2019).

Overall, it is fascinating to learn that preemptive state repression is a mechanism includes many forms to serve the interests of the authoritarian regime, prevent dissenters threat, and enhance their survival.

Authoritarian Military and Repression

Aguilar and Kovras (2019) explored how the military junta reshaped state repression. The authors discussed the enforced disappearances of dissidents to ensure not

only the regime's grip on power but also to prevent external scrutiny and ultimate accountability (Aguilar & Kovras, 2019). Repression contains an autocratic mechanism to empower the regimes, deter the upcoming challenges of political opponents, and thwart international interference in the regime's relationship with dissidents.

Not every practiced form of state repression achieved the regime's interests. In their investigation into the 1969-1988 Dirty War in Mexico, Osorio et al., (2018) found that the state's policies against the dissidents did not help the Mexican state consolidate its power nor did it help the state to provide security or welfare programs for public needs in the long run. The study investigated only one form of repression, which was the disappearance of the leftist dissenters, among them members of peaceful student movements, rural armed groups, urban militias, and workers' parties (Osorio et al., 2018). The dissenters' disappearances caused a heterogeneous effect on state consolidation; however, state repression did not affect state consolidation negatively or positively (Osorio et al., 2018).

The practices of state repression are shaped by those who share the same ideological beliefs in power. Ideological beliefs of state repression refer to the process of justifying the exercise of power, the explanation and the judgment of the events, the identification of right and wrong, and the preparation for action (Scharpf, 2018). In a study which investigated the influence of ideological beliefs on state repression, Scharpf (2018) examined the Argentinean military dictatorship during the Dirty War (1975-1980). He argued that the regime's military supporters, mainly those who shared the same ideological beliefs, willingly executed repressive government policies to repress the

internal enemies. In contrast, those who did not share such views did not put such

policies into practice (Scharpf, 2018). This argument emphasized that the success of the

repressive behavior within the authoritarian regime was determined by the extent to

which the ideological beliefs were shared between the advocates of the military

dictatorship (Scharpf, 2018).

Indigenous culture is a source to empower and justify the practices of state

repression. In her historical investigation of Liberian state repression, Ballah (2017)

concluded that the various military reigns in Liberia (1940s-1990s) empowered the

practices of state repression through the adoption of the indigenous culture that provided

them with the authority to repress student movements. Ballah (2017) argued that,

although students demanded access to political participation peacefully, the military

considered such demands as a threat to the state and its power. The military denial for

students' requests was supported by the belief that the notion of gerontocracy dominated

the nation. Therefore, the authoritarian practices of state repression were culturally

justified (Ballah, 2017).

Foreign Influence and Repression

The post 9/11 environment has witnessed sustained indirect external support for

state repression. According to Regilme Jr. (2018), autocratic regimes who collaborated

with the U.S. war on terror invested more in their repressive behavior to quell dissidents.

Regilme Jr. (2018) investigated such collaborations between the U.S. and Columbia. The

investigation suggested that the Columbian government increased its repressive activities

not only to fight armed rebels but also in targeting innocent civilians and other social

activists whose posed a threat to the regime (Regilme Jr., 2018). Regilme Jr. (2018) indicated that the Columbian regime legitimized its repressive activities by taking advantage of American-Columbian security collaboration and labeling dissidents as subversives who caused a threat to national security, though they were advocates for labor rights and economic reform.

Tolstrup et al., (2019) examined how foreign powers shape the repressive behavior of autocrats during nonviolent protests. They argued that autocrats could intensify or minimize repression against their dissidents after receiving support from their foreign patrons. The authors examined the received signals of support for repression from foreign powers, notably the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, to the dictators of Burma 2007, Zimbabwe 2008, and Burkina Faso 2014. They found that both the Burmese and the Zimbabwean autocrats intensified their repression against their protesters once they received diplomatic support from Russia and China in the UNSC, while the Burkina Faso government minimized the level of repression since it lacked the diplomatic support of France or the US in the UNSC (Tolstrup et al., 2019).

The system of rivalry in global politics does not limit the practice of state repression. In their study of the role of international rivalry in shaping domestic politics, Bak et al., (2019) undermined the conventional notion that external threats for governments can stabilize domestic politics and increase the possibility of national cohesion. They empirically concluded that the external rival threats intensified domestic conflict and made state repression an inevitable response entirely justified by the regimes (Bak et al., 2019).

Civil Protest and Repression

State repression is better understood in the context of violent and nonviolent movements. Bell and Murdie (2018) provided an excellent study to learn about the role of state repression in quelling protesters. The study relied on the utilization of the collective goods approach to analyze popular responses to state repression (Bell & Murdie, 2018). The authors argue that a state with a past or present civil war could experience violent protesters in response to repression. In contrast, those states who did not experience civil war lacked the popular response for repression (Bell & Murdie, 2018).

Girod et al. (2018) also examined the popular responses, both peaceful and violent, to state repression. Their examination emphasized the effectiveness of repressive government behavior and how this could be used to maintain the interests of the autocracy (Girod et al., 2018). They argued further that autocracies with wealthy incomes—oil monarchies like Bahrain 2011, for example—could use repressive behavior against their protesters and containing global criticism of their repression, which ensured the regimes' interests as well (Girod et al., 2018). Autocracies with more meager incomes, however, lacked such containment which resulted in more civil violence like that in Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia during 2011 (Girod et al., 2018). Additionally, they found that the success of the wealthy autocratic regimes in their ability to repress dissidents was attributed to the intensity of coercion and the foreign support for those regimes, which served to demobilize the power of dissidents and allowed for continual repression with impunity (Girod et al., 2018).

Sika (2018) examined how repression was used to create fragmentation within protest movements, arguing that autocratic regimes utilize repression alongside cooptation methods to create protest fragmentation (Sika, 2018). Lawrence (2017), on the other hand, investigated the motivation of the civil protest during the Arab Uprising of 2011. She found out that the families of active protestors were victims of state repression before the popular uprising, and that the increasing level of repression during a protest was counterproductive, causing instead popular resistance which proved to be a future threat for the regime (Lawrence, 2017).

Overall, the studies of Bell and Murdie (2018), Girod et al., (2018), Sika (2018), and Lawrence (2017) focused on the responsive dynamics of state repression in ensuring the failures of both violent and nonviolent dissent movements and in further entrenching the rule of the regime.

Social media played a crucial role in shaping the relationship between state repression and the dissenters mobilization. By looking at the 2011 Tunisian and the Egyptian protests as well as the 2013 Turkish protest, Odabas and Reynolds-Stenson (2018) argued that social media not only provided an opportunity to mobilize more participants in civil protest but also it worked to make repression less likely since it circulated information and rallied sympathizers for the protesters' causes, which then forced the regimes to alter their responses. In a related study, Lee (2018) examined the effect of social media on the dissent-regime relationship in Cambodia. She found that Cambodian youths used hidden tactics on social media to circumvent state repression (Lee, 2018). She agreed that social media could increase participants' mobilization to

voice their dissidence against the state; however, it does not make repression less likely (Lee, 2018).

Lethal and nonlethal state repression was determined differently. Hendrix and Salehyan (2019), examined the possibility of lethal repression in a nonviolent protest in Africa. They found that governments that contained small ethnic coalitions considered peaceful protests to be more threatening. In contrast, those governments that included broad homogenous ethnic coalitions viewed nonviolent mobilization as less aggressive and were therefore less likely to respond with deadly force (Hendrix & Salehyan, 2019).

Christensen (2017) examined the role of geographic territory in determining a government's repressive response. In his empirical examination of the Kenyan government's response to protest, Christensen (2017) found that the government responded with nonlethal repression in urban protesting while it used a lethal practice in responding to rural protesting. Christensen (2017) related those differing responses to the regime's concerns about the participants' mobilization. In urban protesting, where there is a higher population density, lethal repression can inflame the dissent, increase its popularity, and cause full attention; therefore, nonlethal repression was a rational choice (Christensen, 2017). Lethal repression in rural protesting, on the other hand, did not create a backlash that would restrain the government, nor did it draw nation-wide attention; therefore, lethal repression was not a risky choice (Christensen, 2017). Both studies, Hendrix and Salehyan (2019) and Christensen (2017), are significant in their identification of the factors, ethnic coalition and territorial effect, that determined the type of deployment used in state repression.

Chenoweth et al. (2017) took a different approach and examined the relationship between nonviolent movements and state repression, arriving at six findings: dissent evokes state repression, state repression is conditioned by the type of regime, state repression generates short- and long-term effects, state repression is less effective against well-organized nonviolent movements, nonviolent movements tend to elicit less state repression than violent protests, and security force cooperation is critical for both the state and nonviolent movements (Chenoweth et al., 2017).

Ryckman (2019) attempted to explore the transformation of nonviolent movements to violent ones and how the level of state repression was applied. She indicated that the conversion to violence was attributed to the organizational capacity and the slow progress of the movements. The failure of nonviolent methods to achieve the dissent's demands generate the condition for the movement to become a violent one (Ryckman, 2019). To support her exploration of movement escalation, Ryckman (2019) used the Algerian Civil War of 1992.

Ives and Lewis (2019), on the other hand, embraced the idea of violent escalation for nonviolent movements. They argued that the reason for the transformation of nonviolent movements to violent ones occurred as a result of the cost of government repression plus the unorganized nature of the protests, creating out of these two factors the gatekeeping dynamics theory (Ives & Lewis, 2019). To support their theory of gatekeeping dynamics, Ives and Lewis (2019) used the 2015 and 2016 South Africa protests.

State repression was not the only strategic response used by regimes to quell popular protests and defend themselves against popular challengers. In their examination of Chinese state repression in the 2014 Hong Kong protest, Yuen and Cheng (2017) noticed that the Chinese government employed a tactical response to quell protesters called the government's attrition strategy. The term attrition strategy referred to the ability of the government to show protest tolerance while using a proactive tactical repertoire to discredit and wear out the protest while increasing its cost to the movement (Yuen & Cheng, 2017). Yuen and Cheng (2017) argued that, to ensure the effectiveness of such a utilization, the Chinese attrition strategy contained defensive and offensive sides. The defensive side served to confuse the protesters about regime unity, which helped the regime maintain cohesion and loyalty, thereby undermining the political opportunities fueling protests. In contrast, the offensive side served to mobilize the opposition against the protesters by undermining the protests' goals and consequently increasing the costs of protesting (Yuen & Cheng, 2017).

Protesting state repression is perceived differently by the westernized military. In their examination of the Arab Spring and how the military responded to the protesters of Tunis, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, Swed and Weinreb (2015) concluded that nations with complex military relationships with the west responded less violently than those who lacked such connections. The study showed the westernization of the Egyptian and the Tunisian military served to protect the protesters who pushed for regime change, whereas in Syria, with no military westernization, the regime survived. Protesters were quelled (Swed & Weinreb, 2015). Libya, on the other hand, initially experienced the Syrian

scenario, but it changed due to western powers' support for protesters (Swed & Weinreb, 2015).

Taken together, all of these studies—Chenoweth et al., (2017), Ryckman (2019), Ives and Lewis (2019), Yuen and Cheng (2017), Swed and Weinreb (2015)—suggest that the repressive behavior of the government generates the condition of violent escalation, even when the dissent movements are intended to be peaceful.

Dissents' Challenge and Repression

State repression was relevant to the challenges of dissent movements. The dissent movement's challenges to the state could be shaped by political, economic, and ethnic grievances and preferences. Salehyan and Stewart (2016) explored the possibility of dissent movements to challenge their government. They argued that once the governments were capable of deterring dissidents, they were less likely to experience antigovernment action (Salehyan & Stewart, 2016). The authors went further and identified three themes—economic activities, political freedom, and ethnic discrimination—to learn about the foundation of challenges to the dissent movements and the subsequent state responses (Salehyan & Stewart, 2016). Salehyan and Stewart (2016) pointed out that, once the dissidents challenge their governments for economic reasons, the regimes will respond repressively, while challenges to the government for political reasons will result in repression in authoritarian regimes but not in democratic systems since, in democracies, dissidents can use democratic methods to push their demands through non-state agents. Finally, ethnic dissidents were less likely to challenge their governments due to fears of potential repression.

The level of utilization of state repression might shape the quality and the nature of regimes and the relationship with their supporters and dissenters. Slantchev and Matush (2019) examined how preventive repression functions and where it might collapse. The authors referred to preventive repression as the practice that restricts speech, prohibits assembly, controls travel, and employs selective application of laws (Slantchev & Matush, 2019). The purpose of preventative repression is to head off a threat to the regimes by hindering the dissidents' activities, organizations, and eliminating their activists (Slantchev & Matush, 2019). Additionally, Slantchev and Matush (2019) argue that rulers with a high level of repressive capacity developed despotic regimes whereby they would successfully quell their dissidents, while those rulers who were limited in repressive abilities were better off abandoning repression and allowing political contestation. In this sense, autocratic regimes can wager on the status quo. Leaving repression due to the lack of capacity to repress might put the regimes' supporters at risk and drive them to defend the regimes. While this might help the regimes survive, if the regimes underestimate the power of the dissent movement, they will ultimately fail (Slantchev & Matush, 2019).

Political Participation and Repression

The legacy of state repression can negatively influence the motivation of the public to engage in political participation. In their study of the electoral system in the former Soviet Union during the reign of Stalin (1924-1953) compared with the electoral system in Ukraine (2003-2012) under Putin's rule, Zhukov and Talibova (2018) found that the repressed masses were less motivated in the long-term to engage in political

participation. The study findings suggested a pattern of decline in voter turnout in the long-term because of the masses' experience with state repression (Zhukov & Talibova, 2018).

In a similar study of the effect of state repression on political participation, Honari (2018) did not deny the negative impact of repression on political participation; instead, he argued that individuals' perceptions of state repression had been ignored and needed to be considered as the central area of understanding the impact of repression. Since individuals were deemed to be strategic actors with agency, they perceived, interpreted, and responded differently to repression. Thus, the outcome of repression was understood through people's responses to it (Honari, 2018).

Religious Tension and Repression

State repression generates the power to politicize and manipulate religious and ethnic differences. Henne and Klocek (2019) examined how religious conflict can serve the advantage of state repression. The authors considered religious conflict as a religious civil war, which referred to armed conflict between the state and nonstate actors where one party aimed to advance religious interests at the expense of the other party (Henne & Klocek, 2019). The study used cross-national data on religious conflict and repression between 1990-2009. The results indicated that there was a positive effect between the religious conflict and the level of religious repression. Religious oppression is characterized by government policies to restrict and oversee religious practices (Henne & Klocek, 2019). The authors' argument relied on the notion that states who experienced religious conflict could empower the level of their political repression since the nonstate

actor who was religiously motivated was considered a threat to state authority and regime interests (Henne & Klocek, 2019).

In a similar study, Onapajo (2017) examined the connection between state repression and religious violence in Nigeria, particularly the State-Shia conflict. The study suggested that the ongoing practice of repressive state behavior generated further conflict between the oppressed religious group and the government (Onapajo, 2017). This conflict then created the possibility of expanding the violence to a larger scale, potentially reaching other religious sects, like Sunni groups, and providing an opportunity for an international proxy war in Nigeria (Onapajo, 2017). More specifically, the two studies suggested that religious conflict was a continuation of religious repression and provided an opportunity for regimes to invest in state repression; however, such investment might lead to more national challenges for the regimes.

Ethnic Minorities and Repression

State repression contains strategies of assimilation and the exclusion of ethnic minorities. In their study of ethnic demands, Mele and Siegel (2017) argued that oppressed ethnic minority groups accept assimilation in a large state in order to reduce state repression. However, there remains a possibility of engaging with anti-state activities, which could cause a threat to the regime (Mele & Siegel, 2017). To prevent such risks and the possible compliance with their ethnic demands, the regime would launch preemptive repression (Mele & Siegel, 2017).

In another study of ethnic minorities' struggle and state repression, Heijs (2018) examined the forced assimilation of ethnic minorities in both the Soviet Union and

Turkey between the period of 1908-1945. The study focused on the similarities of state

repression for the two regimes against the Chechen-Ingush and the Zaza Kurdish (Heijs,

2018). The two regimes practiced several forms of repression, like massive deportation

for demographic engineering. He concluded that the purpose of forced assimilation was

to lead minorities to the involuntary adoption of the dominant identity of the state (Heijs,

2018).

In another relevant study of state repression and ethnic assimilation and exclusion,

Rorbaek and Knudsen (2015) used mixed methods to examine how ethnic diversity

related to a power struggle and violent state repression. The authors argued that

authoritarian regimes' interests in brutal repression were determined not by the

composition of the national ethnicity; instead, it was established by the power distribution

(Rorbaek & Knudsen, 2015). They found that the more dominant ethnic minorities were

more likely to engage in violent repression to protect their power privileges over other

ethnic groups (Rorbaek & Knudsen, 2015). In other words, brutal state repression is

driven by unequal power distributions between ethnic groups in ethnically diverse nations

(Rorbaek & Knudsen, 2015). Therefore, state repression can be practiced preemptively,

and it can be used in several forms to prevent a potential ethnic threat for the

authoritarian regimes.

Lindemann and Wimmer (2018), on the other hand, studied ethnic conflicts in the

context of state repression. The authors found out that the repressive capacity of the state

contributed to finding an opportunity for future ethnic rebellion if there was external

support (Lindemann & Wimmer, 2018). Their argument indicated that ethnic conflicts

would not happen unless there was a combination of repressive state behavior and external support to motivate the disadvantaged ethnic groups to armed conflict (Lindemann & Wimmer, 2018).

In another related study, Konaev and Brathwaite (2017) examined whether state repression was the driving reason for spreading ethnic conflict into a neighboring state. They investigated several ethnic conflicts between 1976-2009. Their research investigation suggested that it was not state repression that helped to spread ethnic conflicts across international borders; rather, it was political opportunity that provided the condition for state repression to either expand the conflicts into neighboring states or to instead prevent it (Konaev & Brathwaite, 2017). The study referred to political opportunity, which was a crucial factor in helping state repression in spreading or preventing ethnic conflict, as a set of institutional indicators that reflect a dynamic and highly contingent political environment, allowing ethnic groups to respond to increasing repression (Konaev & Brathwaite, 2017).

Barcelo (2018) empirically investigated whether state repression would affect the support of the ethnic secessionist movement. His research took into consideration the Catalonian separatist movement in Spain to solve the puzzle of whether secessionists who experienced repression became more likely to demobilize and acquiesce to the state or become more mobilized and radicalized against the state (Barcelo, 2018). The results suggested that there was no clear evidence state repression affected ethnic secessionist movements in becoming either radicalized or demobilized (Barcelo, 2018). This

fascinating literature provides a better understanding of the interest of regimes in political domination and how repressive behavior has become the means for such an end.

State repression and refugees are also related. Wright and Moorthy (2018) explored the fact that a host state can increase state repression once refugees present grievances and become mobilized. Host states with substantial economic capacity, however, might moderate repression. Wright and Moorthy (2018) attributed the relationship between repression and refugees to the political fears that might be derived from hosting refugees.

Strategic Repression

The disciplinary nature of state repression is determined by the regime's ability to engage with economic activities. In their comparative study of state repression between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Markowitz and Omelicheva (2018) investigated the authoritarian regimes' ability to consolidate their control over economic activities. They found that those authoritarian regimes which controlled economic activities, including the illicit ones, were more likely to practice disciplined state repression. In contrast, authoritarian regimes which lacked such ability practiced undisciplined state repression (Markowitz & Omelicheva, 2018). The study concluded that Tajikistan state repression became disciplined because of regime control over drugs and other illicit activities. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan's repression became undisciplined because the regime lacked involvement in such activities (Markowitz & Omelicheva, 2018). It seems that the characteristics of disciplined and undisciplined repression were determined by the ability

of the autocratic regimes to consolidate their control over national revenue, legal and illegal, and to invest wisely to deepen their oppressiveness.

The experience of legislation in authoritarian states plays a significant role in increasing or decreasing the regimes' repressive behavior. Rivera (2017) examined how the authoritarian states could benefit from legislation to co-opt dissent movements and contain the challenges of the opposition. He argued that autocratic regimes experienced with elected legislators and opposition parties are less repressive than those who lacked such experience (Rivera, 2017). It was widely understood that repression was a regime response to the challenges of the dissidents; however, autocratic regimes can ameliorate the level of repression only if the elected legislations serve the interests of the regimes (Rivera, 2017).

A unique practice of state repression was found in China, where it was able to be decentralized and leased out to nonstate agents. Ong (2018) studied how state repression was practiced by local governments who used violent nonstate agents to ensure the interest of the national government in China. Nonstate agents consisted of thugs-for-hire, gangsters who were expected to repress residents and coerce them into complying with government objectives (Ong, 2018). Such practices by the local governments benefited the goals of both the national government and the local ones through a third party who had been perceived by the residents a proxy agent for decentralized repressive behavior (Ong, 2018).

State repression has evolved to a transnational level between the various authoritarian regimes. Olar (2019) investigated how collaboration between authoritarian

regimes led to creating a diffusion of repression. He argued that every authoritarian

repression was influenced by another authoritarian repression (Olar, 2019). Moreover, the

authoritarian regimes can adjust their level of repression institutionally based on the

experiences of, and information provided by, other regimes to ensure their strategic

objectives, primarily political survival (Olar, 2019). The findings of the study suggested

that repression was diffused institutionally between similar regimes but not between

those regimes who face similar dissent movements (Olar, 2019).

Authoritarian leaders consider the defection of the military in their order to

repress. In her study of state repression and whether the defection of the military can

influence the authoritarian leaders, Fruge (2019) utilized the principal-agent model to

examine how the response of the military influenced the autocratic leaders' decision for

repression. She argued that authoritarian leaders could use repression strategically to

avoid military defection by considering whether the military would follow the repressive

orders (Fruge, 2019). Leaders who enjoy the right amount of power could repress without

fear of military defection. In contrast, those who experience a decrease in power will use

repression strategically to distort their risk of losing control (Fruge, 2019).

Soft Repression

State repression was not only in the autocratic regimes. Fallon et al., (2018)

introduced a new practice for state repression called soft repression. Soft repression

referred to the mobilization of nonviolent means to silence and eradicate oppositional

ideas (Fallon et al., 2018). In their investigation of such practices, they found that hyper-

regimes, which are also known as transitional democracies, could utilize state resources

like media, elections, legislation, constitutions, international agreements, and public opinion to silence activists and to protect themselves from international criticism (Fallon et al., 2018). Their examination focused mainly on the democratic transition in Ghana and how the new regime adopted soft repression to ensure the marginalization of the opposition without international attention (Fallon et al., 2018). Soft repression is one of the strategic ways regimes weaken dissent movements.

Authoritarian leaders might experience constraints on their repressive practices, which serve to lessen the violation of human rights. In their study of the possibility to constrain state repression, Dragu and Lupu (2017) agreed that both institutional and normative mechanisms serve to restrict the level of practice since state agents might fear the consequences of the repression or might have an internalized norm against it. To expand on these mechanisms of constraint, Dragu and Lupu (2017) introduced a new model, the "logic of expectations," whereby some state agents might make decisions about whether to obey or disobey repressive orders based on what other agents might do. To analyze state agents' disobedience, Dragu and Lupu (2017) used historical exploration in countries like Prussia in 1848, Russia in 1917, Argentina in 2001, Georgia in 2003, Tunis and Egypt in 2011, and Sri Lank in 2015. They attributed agents' disobedience to their repressive leaders to consequential fears, normative concerns, or both (Dragu & Lupu, 2017). Such constraints would make repression less likely.

Intra-ruling elite politics determine autocratic utilization for state repression. In his study of the authoritarian regimes of Eastern European nations during the cold war, particularly East Germany, Thomson (2016) noticed that each autocratic regime

contained soft and hard-liners who interacted with each other as a result of the surrounding socio-economic conditions. Such interactions could serve to form the regimes' repressive and redistributive strategies (Thomson, 2016). He argued that, when the government lacked the strength to suppress mass mobilization, soft-liners would become the dominant force and, therefore, would allow the government to rely heavily on redistribution to ensure political stability. In contrast, when there was an economic struggle to target the redistribution, the hardliners would become the dominant force in government, tending to repress violently and offer less redistributive politics (Thomson, 2016). Thomson (2016) attributed the intra-ruling elite policies to the economic system of the nation and the adoption of repressive and redistributive policies to the regime practices of carrots and sticks during the popular uprising of East Germany in 1953.

Foreign Occupation and Repression

State repression has been instrumentally and lethally practiced during the military occupation of foreign nations. In her historical investigation of the military occupation of Nazi Germany and of the Soviet Union in Estonia, Rahi-Tamm (2017) concluded that the two autocratic regimes engineered several forms of repression to maintain their occupation during the years of the Second World War. While the Nazis suppressed the Estonian national resistance movement militarily during the invasion, the Stalinists of the Red Army not only enhanced a military occupation but also purged the Estonian society by creating enticed collaboration, causing public fears, performing mass killings, and forcing deportations (Rahi-Tamm, 2017). Such practices served to subject the Estonian society to Soviet norms and quelled resistance to the Stalin regime (Rahi-Tamm, 2017).

In a similar study of repression in war, Coynash and Charron (2019) investigated the Russian crackdown in Crimea. They found that Russia introduced severe repressive measures to silence the Crimean people, the Tatar residents, and the Ukrainian nationals who resisted the annexation of the peninsula in 2014, considering it a state of exception (Coynash & Charron, 2019). The Russian repression became a killing machine used to quell the Tatar and the Ukrainian resistance and to sustain the Russian annexation for the peninsula (Coynash & Charron, 2019).

In another similar study for lethal repression during the war of national liberation, House (2017) examined the French colonial repression used to quell both Moroccan and Algerian nationalists who protested violently against the French colonial authority in the 1950s and 1960s. According to House (2017), these nationalists, who were considered pro-independence activists, expanded their demonstrations from the mainland reaching to Paris to ensure their voices in support of independence were heard on the world stage. He noticed that the repressive behavior of the French colonial authority was a lethal one that practiced differently to contain the nationalists' demonstration (House, 2017). House (2017) argued that the urban mobility of the demonstrations determined the utilization of the French state's repressive behavior. In the colonies, more particularly Morocco and Alegria, the French military was deployed to restore law and order, which turned the colonies into a war zone for independence; meaning while, in the Paris protesting, the government used the police to put out the civil riot (House, 2017). The French state repression, whether practiced containing the colonies' nationalists or the Paris protesters,

witnessed human rights abuse, severe punishment, imprisonment, torture, disappearances, expelling, and mass killing (House, 2017).

Post-civil war repression increases the possibility of peace failure. Keels and Nichols (2018) examined the peace process in countries like Liberia, Chad, and Iraq, countries that experienced civil conflict as the result of state repression. The examination suggested that the peace process in the post-civil war environment did not create peace for these nations; instead, it led to severe repression, which ignited a new popular uprising and renewed civil war (Keels & Nichols, 2018). Keels and Nichols (2018) argued that the motivation behind the adoption of repression in the post-war environment was the regime's fear of new challenges to their political control; therefore, the post-war environment became a new period of repression that generated a new popular uprising and renewed the old civil war (Keels & Nichols, 2018).

Democracy and Repression

Advanced democracies might also engage in repressive behavior to safeguard national security. Dragu (2017) created a model by utilizing game theory to analyze when and how democracies can engage in oppressive behavior while fighting terrorism. The conclusion of his study suggested that repressive counterterrorism can be counterproductive in certain conditions, like when the government experienced a high-level terrorist attack, when the cost of engaging in repressive activity was low, and, finally, when there was little interest in terrorism prevention from the community (Dragu, 2017). Dragu's (2017) study was a significant in that it empirically addressed the puzzle of the counterproductive repression of democracies in the context of counterterrorism.

In another related study concerning national security and state repression, Bolash-Boza (2016) examined how mass incarceration and mass deportation in the U.S. generated tools for U.S. state repression, particularly during the Obama Administration. She argued that American mass imprisonment and deportation came as a result of the U.S.'s post-9/11 national security strategy, which was shaped by the fears of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Bolash-Boza, 2016). Bolash-Boza's (2016) study did not refer to state repression as a rival system between the regime and the dissent movement; instead, the environment of 9/11 provided the tools for the U.S. government to repress illegal immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean by incarceration and radical deportation.

Finally, as the above-reviewed literature suggests, state repression is often a regime's response to surrounding challenges. It can be practiced responsively or preemptively to protect the regime's interests and suppress their challengers. From this perspective, I concluded that the reviewed literature did not give attention to the foundational factors that contribute to the practice of state repression, nor did it indicate that state repression was an outcome of the rival system between the regimes and their dissidents. I argue, supported by my theoretical framework, that state repression was created, developed, practiced, and invested in as a result of a combination of factors determined through the interaction between the systems of the individual, societal groups, and outsiders' involvement with the repressive regimes.

Review and Synthesis of Related Studies to Research Question

Syrian in the diaspora, whether they are refugees or residents of the hosted nations, have expressed different attitudes toward the Assad regime and the settlement of the ongoing violence. I found three studies examined the perspectives of the Syrian in Diaspora, more particularly the Syrian refugees in both Turkey and Lebanon. The three studies agreed that the Syrian wanted to end the civil war to eliminate their suffering. However, these studies did not examine the Syrian perspective in state repression and how it has been developed by the surrounding factors of the Syrian regime. For example, Fabbe et al., (2019) study suggested that the Syrian refugees in Turkey were sharply divided among themselves concerning a ceasefire and a peace agreement; however, they preferred an end to the war to stop their suffering.

In another study for the Syrian refugees attitudes in Turkey, Mironova et al., (2020) concluded that the Syrian refugees who were associated with insurgency, whether they were Islamically or secularly oriented, were highly motivated to remain in the war against the regime. The authors also found out that Islamists refugees were not highly concerned about creating an Islamic State in Syria as much as they were concerned about regime change (Mironova et al., 2020).

In contrast, Masterson and Lehmann (2020) examined whether the humanitarian aid for the Syrian refugees in Lebanon could motivate them to join armed groups against the Assad regime. The conclusion disagreed with the conventional theory that refugees are candidates for armed recruitments. Instead, the authors argued that humanitarian aid did not mobilize the Syrians in Lebanon to join the fighting against Assad forces

(Masterson & Lehmann, 2020). Based on this, my study aims to examine the perspectives of the Syrian refugees in the U.S to explore the contributed factors for the State repression.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I presented my literature search strategy, the relevant key terms, and how the literature was connected to my topic. Also, I discussed the modified model of the theoretical framework of this study. By explaining each part of the model, I showed how it is relevant to understanding the practice of state repression. I explained how each part of the model was connected to the practice of state repression. I further supported each part of the model by utilizing theories of power, leadership, and resource mobilization. The model then led to identifying the foundational factors that contributed to state repression. Finally, I showed how other researchers presented and analyzed state repression. By reviewing their studies, I discovered the gaps, and took a further step to add new knowledge to the literature of state repression.

Major Aspects in the Literature Summarized

The major findings of the literature summarized here are, first, the general understanding that state repression is about repressive behavior of regimes, which violate human rights to contain challenges made by dissent movements. Second, that state repression falls into several categories. These categories are: (a) a regime's preemptive repression to avoid popular concession, (b) authoritarian military repression to impact the dynamic relationships between the regimes and the dissidents, (c) the influence of foreign support in shaping authoritarian repression, (d) state repression and civil protest, both

violent and nonviolent, (e) authoritarian repression resulting from the fears of dissidents'

challenges, (f) the historical impact of state repression on political participation, (g)

religious tension and the possibility of increasing state repression, (h) the investment of

state repression in ethnic minority and refugee challenges, (i) strategic repression to

utilize national resources for the regime's interests, (j) soft repression to ensure less

popular challenges, (k) foreign occupation to suppress national resistance and the

demands for independence, and (l) the use of repression in democracy to protect national

security.

Known and Not Known in the Discipline Related to the Topic of Study

In line with the reviewed literature, this study suggests that the known part is the

conditions that tend to create state repression as well as how these repressive regime

behaviors can be categorized in fulfilling different purposes. Perhaps most notable amid

the current research is the methods by which state repression is used not only in

autocratic regimes but also within transitional democratic regimes. Unsurprisingly, state

repression is a tool for regime control and security.

What is unknown, on the other hand, and therefore in need of further research, are

the contributing factors of state repression. By referring to the theoretical framework laid

out above, I argued that the interaction between the three systems (individual, societal,

external) provided the required tools to explore the contributing factors and unraveled

their influence on the practice of state repression. By examining their contributions, the

study of state repression can be fully understood.

The Literature Gaps Filled by the Study

Authoritarian regimes want to stay in power (Dragu & Lupu, 2017; Sievert, 2018), and repression is the tool for achieving that goal. Several studies have analyzed and explained state repression, focusing on the causes, dynamics, campaigns, agents, consequences, support, timing, cost, intensity, increasing, decreasing, and methods of coercion (McMichael, 2016; Sierra, 2017; Stockey, 2017; Thomson, 2016; Young, 2019; Young 2020). Missing from the literature, however, is a systematic investigation of the factors that provide the foundation of the autocratic regime and how these factors contribute to state repression. The reviewed literature also did not relate state repression to state terror.

Furthermore, the reviewed literature did not indicate if state repression, whether practiced preemptively or responsively, was an outcome of the fears of the rival system that took place between dissidents and the regimes. In other words, no work has yet indicated that state repression was an outcome of the rival system that occurred between the authoritarian regimes and their dissent movements. Because of the rival system, regimes responded violently. This is what drives state repression to become another type of state terror. More importantly, the reviewed literature has ignored that state repression can be shaped by the regime perception which, in turn, is influenced by a combination of factors from the domestic and the surrounding environments. Finally, the explored factors empowered the Assad regime's repressive behavior and helped the regime to survive and prevent a regime change. The following chapter will detail the methodology that was used in this study to fill the gaps in the literature.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover and explore the various perspectives of the Syrians in the U.S. diaspora about the reasons and conditions that empower the Assad regime's practice of state repression. The perspective of the Syrian opposition living in the diaspora, particularly those who reside in the US, provided the road for discovery and exploration. Scholars of government have established a relationship between authoritarian regimes and state repression (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2019; Olar, 2019; Ritter & Conrad, 2016). Authoritarian regimes enjoy absolute rule (Orvis & Drogus, 2021). The absolute rule generally defined as the practice of repressive behavior of such a government to ensure power survival and complete suppression for the political dissenters (Chenoweth et al., 2017; Rivera, 2017).

In this chapter, I reflect on my research design by explaining the rationale of my conceptual framework. Then, I explain my role as a qualitative researcher and how, personally and professionally, I am integrated into the study. Ethical issues will be addressed, as well. Next, I move to the methodology where I state the logic of participants' selection, instrumentation, data methods of collection, and the analysis plan. Finally, the issues of trustworthiness will be discussed.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question for this study was as follows: What was the perception of the Syrians in the U.S. diaspora concerning the reasons and conditions that continue to empower the Assad regime to practice state repression?

Central Concept

The central concept of this study was to discover and explore the various perspectives of the Syrians in the U.S. diaspora about the reasons and conditions that empower the Assad regime's practice of state repression. The historical roots of Syrian state repression go back to 1963, once the Baath Party successfully captured power in Syria (Dukhan, 2019; Roberts, 2015). It became more institutionalized in 1970 under the reign of Hafez Assad, the father of Bashar. In 2000, the Syrian nation experienced the transfer of power from the father to the son. This transfer of power did not decrease the repression but led to popular resistance, national polarization, and the increased practice of state repression (Perthes, 2004).

The theoretical framework for this study was built around the fact that the Syrian state repression, since it is beginning, is supported by several factors generated by the surrounding environment of the leadership, society, and the nation. Inspired by Patton and McMahon (2015) STF, I sought to address interactions between individual, societal, and the surrounding external environmental systems. Such utilization provided an opportunity to explore the contributed factors. These factors were associated with individual-family background, leadership efficiency, politicized and mobilized social organizations, rival dissents, and foreign involvement. I discovered during the study that state repression worked for the advantage of the regime. This is an explanation of why the dissenters failed with their mission of regime change on the one hand. On the other hand, state repression became publicly accepted.

Research Tradition and Approach

The research tradition was qualitative method with a case study design. O'Sullivan et al. (2017) explained that qualitative research is defined by its extensive use of interviews, narrative data, and rich deep development of narrative while the term case study refers to the research that focuses on individuals, organizations, events, programs, or processes (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The selected case study design should be consistent with the systems theoretical framework to explore the factors that contribute to the foundation of the absolute rule and how this enhances state repression, which led to developing the various Syrian opposition groups represented by the SNC.

The selected case study focused on Assad regime from 2000-2011. This period is the first decade that marked the authoritarian transition from father to son. It is characterized by a popular rage that led to a bloody civil war, foreign intervention, increasing the political repression, and ensured the regime domination in power.

Rationale

The qualitative research method was selected for this study, specifically interviewing. Interviewing while generally time-consuming and potentially expensive provides a plethora of data providing a rich context and information. Interviews also provide the human perspective that secondary data often eliminates. Additionally, the rationale for this research is three folds. First, the population of the Syrians in Diaspora in the U.S is unknown. There were some limited resources to identify the Syrians in the American Diaspora. Consequently, the selected sample size was reduced. Second, I expected the reduced sample size might be reduced further as a result of participants'

decision in interviewing; however, it did not happen. Third, the reduced sample size offered an opportunity to explore individual experiences and provides a rich background of information.

Patton (2015) indicated that interviewing generated an opportunity for researchers to understand the systematic thinking of the system. He also indicated that researchers need to engage in holistic thinking that will enable them to ensure the possibility of program evaluation and policy analysis (Patton, 2015). To follow Patton's (2015) indication, there were three steps of thinking involved. The first step sought to identify the components of the Assad regime, the second step focused on the explanation of the components, and the final step aggregated the knowledge of each component as complete knowledge. The components of the Assad regimes were divided into personality dictatorship, tribal loyalty, single-party domination, government agencies, military support, politicized social groups, and external support. By using interviews and adopting systematic thinking this yields a better understanding of why the Assad regime (2000-2011) functions the way it does.

Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative researcher is the primary data collection instrument, and this necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study. Sutton and Austin (2015) also indicated that the qualitative researcher is responsible to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. As a qualitative researcher, I was an instrument of inquiry. Hence, I positioned myself throughout the research study by developing a questionnaire and

piloting it to reduce interview bias. Therefore, my role shaped my reflexivity in which I could be conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that I brought to my research study. Reflexivity is determined through a systematic assessment of the researcher's identity, positionality, and subjectivities (Creswell, 2014; Pannucci, & Wilkins, 2010; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Personal and Professional Relationship

I am a professional educator. I have been studying government regimes around the world for the last 3 decades. Based on this experience of teaching and research, it was my primary concern to ensure that I was professionally integrated into this study. This has concluded the work of this study to be objective from the standpoint of view. Therefore, I was very confident to state that I had no personal relationship with the participants, although some may share with me a similar background. Finally, because of our cultural background, I felt a rapport was established between my participants, which helped to collect enough data for my study and me.

Research Bias

I have taught several classes in Middle Eastern politics, governments, and history. My knowledge in the Middle East is solid, and I felt I could analyze the various foundations of each regime. My primary concern in this study was to explore the contributed reasons and conditions to the practice of the Syrian state repression. This fundamental concern drove me to learn how I could facilitate knowledge of repressive autocracies, using Syria as an example, to facilitate a social change and maybe prevent what I have called in chapter one of the inherited authoritarian regime. I did not see my

knowledge and passion in government study a potential challenge; however, I realized

that increasing knowledge in authoritarian regime can serve to create a new avenue to

drive an end for repression and develop new approaches for social changes for the Syrian

People or any man experiences all forms of repression. This liberal view inspired my

belief in research for the cause of humanity of the study.

Ethical Issues

Because of the sensitivity of this study and ongoing worries about the safety of

the participants, I intended to refer to each participant through a third-person voice. This

ensured that each participant remained unknown to the public and to anyone from

overseas who might access this work through the internet. Participants safety and

concerns improve the likelihood that accurate and truthful perceptions were shared.

Methodology

This study focuses on understanding and analyzing the Syrian perspective in

Diaspora for state repression under Bashar Assad, the son, from the period 2000-2011. It

was carried out only by interviewing those who live and work in the US. Participants

were Syrian immigrants who experienced the conditions of the Syrian state repression

during the years 2000-2011 that the Assad family reigned. The qualitative approach of

this study provided a broad perception for each participant, which made study-rich-based

information (Patton, 2015).

The study methodology contained the following steps which explained here and

elaborated upon later: (a) sampling, (b) data collection, (c) interviewing formats, (d)

interview questions, and (e) data analyzing and management.

The first step was the sampling and the target population. According to O'Sullivan et al., (2017), the sample refers to a subset of units selected from a broader set of the same unit, while the target population refers to the type of people that will participate in the study. The samplings are divided between purposeful sampling, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling. My plan contained a purposeful sampling since it focused on selecting information-rich cases whose study illuminated the questions under investigation (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this case, my purposeful sampling and the target population were the Syrian citizens who live in the US.

The second step of the plan was the data collection. Ravitch and Carl (2016) indicated that qualitative data collection should be intentional, rigorous, and systematic. The source of the collection relied on in-depth interviews.

The third step focused on in-depth interviews. It was the interview society (Patton, 2015). This area had two parts: (a) the format of the Interview and (b) developing rapport. The size of the in-depth Interview was a semistructured interview with open-ended questions. In-depth Interviews enabled me to go deeply into the participants' insight and obtain more extensive data for the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2012). There were telephone interviews for those who could not be reached and face-to-face Interviews (Opdenakker, 2006); however, because of the global epidemic of COVID-19, there was no fact-to-face interview; instead, I used phone, zoom, and emails interviews. The second part was the art of the Interview to create a rapport and ensure mutual recognition between the participants and me. According to Patton (2015), "rapport is built conveying empathy and understanding without judgment" (p. 458). Therefore,

there was a need to be an early invitation that highlighted to the participants the notion of the Interview, their rights, informed consent, an explanation that their participation was voluntarily one not mandatory, and further explanation to the ethical principles that provided by Walden IRB (Walden University, IRB, 2013).

The fourth step focused on the preparation of the interview questions. Patton (2015) identified six types of research questions. Three of the six types agree with the purpose of the dissertation. These three are: (a) experience and behavior questions, (b) knowledge questions, and (c) background questions (Patton, 2015). The second part of this area was the phrases of the questions where I ensured that they were clear, understandable, and no ambiguity (Myers & Newman, 2007; Turner, 2010). The final part contained probes to follow-up and obtained further answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The fifth step was data analyzing and management which contained the following procedures: (a) organizing, (b) reflectivity, (c) listening, (d) coding, (e) analyzing, and (f) theming. I created these procedures after I studied the suggestions of data management for Rubin and Rubin (2012), Sutton and Austin (2015), Ravitch and Carl (2016), and Holcomb and Davidson (2006).

Now I will elaborate on these steps in the methodology:

Participants Selection Logic

The logic of selection was determined by several areas: (a) population, (b) sampling strategy, (c) recruiting procedures, (d) sample size, (e) and participants' invitation. The next paragraphs provide more details for each area.

Identify the Population

The initial step in selection of participants was to identify the target population that best can provide answers to the research question. According to O'Sullivan et al., (2017) the target population refers to the type of people that will participate in the study. Thus, it was critical to recruit participants who were relevant and experienced the phenomenon of the research study (Bell, 2011; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The target population of this study were those Syrians who experienced the Syrian state repression and moved to live in the U.S.

Sampling Strategy

According to Marshall (1996) there are three common strategies for sampling used in qualitative research: (a) convenience, (b) purposeful, and (c) theoretical. The strategy that I adopted was purposeful sampling which also known as nonprobability sampling and judgment sampling (O'Sullivan et al., 2017). According to Ravitch and Carl (2016) it "entails that individuals are purposefully chosen to participate in a research study for specific reasons that stem from the core constructs and contexts of the research questions" (p. 128). Marshall (1996) explained purposeful sampling strategy as the most productive strategy since it contributes significantly to the answers to the research questions. The sample represented some members of the Syrian activists and nationalists of the Syrian Community who live in the US. The sample size helped to achieve saturation since the data collection relied heavily on in-depth interviews where a deep understanding obtained.

Sample Size

The original size of the sample was 7-10 members, where it intended to be used for in-depth interviews since the members were previously deeply involved with the Syrian regime. The rationale behind this size was that the saturation can be reached with as few as 7-10 interviewees, particularly when the interview was in-depth so that deep understanding was obtained (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016); however, the size was expanded through the snowball sampling technique to include 15 participants. Therefore, the research study reached saturation. The size of the sample sustained the strategy of purposeful sampling that determined the choice based on the participants' experience and knowledge (O'Sullivan, 2017; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Participants' Invitations

The participants received an email attachment to learn whether they would accept an interview. A phone call followed up to ensure their acceptance. Once the acceptance granted, an invitation was scheduled for further contact. See appendix B for the invitation. All the procedures for invitation and contact with participants adhered to the ethical guidelines of Walden IRB (Walden University, IRB, 2013).

Instrumentation

I developed an instrument based on several feedbacks from some experts in Middle East politics and history. The created instrument agreed with the nature of qualitative research (Patton, 2015; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). I intended in this instrument to have semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained that in semi-structured interviews, researchers have a specific topic to learn about, prepare a limited number of questions in advance, and plan to ask

follow-up questions. Additionally, Yin (2013) pointed out that qualitative researchers could start formulating their questions from several sources like literature and field. I formulated my research question and instrument questions from these two sources. My questions are located in Appendix.

For the purposes of this research, an interview schedule was designed measuring experiences of state repression, violent and nonviolent, and other information pertinent to the Assad regime, the son 2000-2011. The major concept of this research was state repression. State repression in this research is defined as regime-power domination, violent or nonviolent, perpetrated against dissidents by authoritarian regimes. In this research, for example, to measure repression, a question was asked about how the participants perceived the domestic support and the political loyalty to the regime. Additionally, more efforts were practiced ensuring the validity and credibility of the content. The following paragraph will explain how.

First, rapport with participants contributed to creating a friendly environment. Boutain and Hitti (2006) noted the establishment of rapport, adherence to question format and sequence, and the appropriate use of silence, clarification, and paraphrasing are the most often-noted areas for interviewer orientation. I intended to have my participants comfortable to ensure a good quality of answers (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Some techniques to ensure participants' comfortability were (a) "informed consent" with clear language to help the participants understand the purpose of the study, and (b) ensure protection for their privacy where no one could identify the identity of my participants during data collection.

Second, interview questions were organized orderly and expressed in the daily language of the interviewees (Patton, 2015). According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), questions need to be worded in a way not to narrow the options of answering them or to restrict the interviewees' approaches to the questions. This mean that qualitative interviews are designed to pose open questions which encourage interviewees to speak their mind (Pretto, 2011), and the interview is semi-structured. Therefore, I designed my interview guide and worded my interview questions to ensure participants' comfortability, understanding, and freedom to talk. The guide contained the following protocols: (a) introductory statement, (b) interviewing formats (c) interview questions, and (d) closing statement.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Procedures of Recruiting and Invitation

The recruit procedures contained voluntary participation methods and the sources for those who were directly relevant to my research interest. Two procedures were used for recruiting: (a) the online methods, including social media and emails, and (b) the search through a mediator. These two procedures explained as the following.

First, the Internet marketplace was an excellent source for participants recruiting. Shatz (2016) examined several online sources for participants' recruiting for the researchers' community like Amazon Mechanical Turk, Crowdsourcing, and social media for announcements. Indeed, I used social media like Facebook. Nevertheless, online recruiting was useful and could overcome geographical barriers; there was one limitation like delays in responses (Meho, 2006).

Second, some of my current participants acted as moderators to refer to me to more people. Kristensen and Raven (2015) indicated that mediators can use their former and informer position to help researchers in recruiting. Once the trust and rapport were established, I experienced more participants to join. I used both methods, more particularly, I leaned to the second method since I had a professional relationship with some of the participants who helped me to recruit more participants.

Each participant received an invitation. All the invitation sent via emails contained a clear indication that participation was voluntary to ensure a comfortable environment (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Informed consent was provided, as well. More importantly, all the procedures for invitation and contact with participants adhered to the ethical guidelines of Walden IRB (Walden University, IRB, 2013).

Data Collection Procedures

Ravitch and Carl (2016) indicated that qualitative data collection should be intentional, rigorous, and systematic. The primary foundation for the data sources of my research study is the interview. According to Seidman (2012), interviewing provides researchers with an understanding of people's actions and behavior. If the interview is well planned, it becomes a forum and process by which researchers can explore people's perspectives to achieve their research needs (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Rubin and Rubin (2012) identified four categories of interviews: focus group, online internet interviews, casual conversations, semistructured, and unstructured interviews. From this, I adopted

the in-depth interviews with individual members of the Syrian Community who reside in the U.S. All the interviews were semistructured interviews with open-ended questions.

Turner (2012) indicated that the practice of an open-ended interview approach allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information and helps the researchers to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up. Interviewees responded anyway they chose, provided more elaboration for their answers, they can disagree with the questions, and raise new issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The in-depth interviewing was an excellent tool of research since it provided me with the opportunities to gain a wealth of information and keep adjusting the open-ended questions for further clarification, as Rubin and Rubin (2012), suggested.

In the interview society, the researcher needs to be reflective and flexible in conducting an interview (Patton, 2015; Laureate Education, 2016). To ensure a comfortable environment and rapport with the interviewees, the duration of each interview was determined based on an agreement between me and my interviewees (Laureate Education, 2017). I honored their request, and I adhered to the scheduled time for each interview. However, I requested an hour for each interview only if they had availability for that. Before the interview began, I provided an introductory statement, so they could understand the nature of the interview, and their participation was voluntary. By doing this, I observed that the participants felt that they were research partners and generated more trust between us. This area had two parts, (a) the format of the Interview and developing rapport, and (b) the interview questions.

Interview Formats. In the first part, the size of the in-depth Interview was a semistructured interview with open-ended questions. In-depth Interviews enabled me to go deeply into the participants' insight and obtain more extensive data for the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2012). The second part was the art of the Interview to create a rapport and ensure mutual recognition between the participants and me. According to Patton (2015), "rapport is built conveying empathy and understanding without judgment" (p. 458).

I planned to implement face-to-face and those who preferred video calls or zoom, or phone calls, their preferences were honored. Unfortunately, there was no face-to-face interview because of COVID-19. Therefore, I could not learn about their body language (Opdenakker, 2006).

Because of the global epidemic of COVID-19, phone calls were the most possible format interviewing. Rubin and Rubin (2012) indicated that where face-to-face an interview is impossible, telephone interviewing is a good option since it saves money, time, and helps interviewers reach people nation-wide. Phone calls could benefit researchers by reducing cost, time, enhance interviewees' safety, and reaching participants who are geographically dispersed and cannot be reached physically (Novick, 2008).

Another possible interview format because of COVID-19 was the emails interviews. In this respect, I followed the enumerated conditions by Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez (2015). These conditions were: (a) justify email interviews are useful to a research project; (b) ensure there is evidence that the target population will be open

to email interviewing as a form of data collection; and (c) ensure the email interview supports the researchers' theoretical perspective. Indeed, I did the following: (a) I identified constraints like the expected time to response and the possibility of misunderstanding the questions, (b) I became fully prepared by following up with text messages, (c) I established rapport, (d) I asked appropriate questions, (e) as respondents to respond carefully and in depth, and (f) I ended my email interview appropriately (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015).

Interview Questions. There were three parts need to be considered. The first one was the types of the questions. Patton (2015) identified six types of research questions. Three of the six types agree with the purpose of the dissertation. These three were: (a) experience and behavior questions, (b) knowledge questions, and (c) background questions (Patton, 2015). I used during the interviews the three types of the questions experience, knowledge, and social background. While the social background question was an introductory, the rest of the questions were about the participants' experiences and knowledge (See Appendix). The second part was the phrases of the questions where I ensured they were clear, understandable, and no ambiguity (Myers & Newman, 2007; Turner, 2010). The final part contained probes to follow-up and obtains further answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Thus, all my questions were open-ended questions based on informal conversation. There was a follow-up question whenever since there was a chance.

Debriefing participants was very crucial for the research study. Rubin and Rubin (2012) indicated that people are more willing to talk to the researchers if they feel

personally connected to them. Indeed, I had to read to them how I understood their answers, and I offered to provide them back with transcripts to ensure there was no confusion or misunderstanding for the conversation. More importantly, I took the time to ensure that each participant understood the meaning of "Informed Consent" (Laureate Education, 2016).

Interviewees are humans, and we are obligated to honor their dignity, privacy, safety, and anonymity. Their identities should not be identified by outsiders for their safety and their families' safety as well. As a researcher who seeks positive social change and knowledge, I fully adhered to the guideline of ethics that addressed by the IRB of Walden to ensure no such violation for any ethical principles and no potential harm for anyone (Walden University, IRB, 2013). Finally, a closing statement was stated for future contact. In fact, some became my friends in Facebook.

Data Analysis Plan

Creswell (2016) asserted that the purpose of the study sets the stage for researchers to point out what they hope to accomplish in research. The purpose of this research study was to discover and explore the various perspectives of the Syrians in the United States diaspora about the reasons and conditions that empower the Assad regime to practice of state repression. A plan was created to analyze the collected data with codes and categories. The foundation of the plan relies on several suggestions of the following literature.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested several steps for data management and analysis. These are: (a) transcriptions and summaries, (b) coding, (c) sorting and

comparing, (d) weigh and integration, and (e) generalize the findings. Also, Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggested an approach contains three-pronged data processes: (a) data organization and management, (b) writing and presentation, and (c) immersive engagement. Additionally, Sutton and Austin (2015) suggested another approach contains the following steps: (a) data interpretation, (b) data transcribing and checking, (c) reading between lines for the purpose of reaching saturation, (d) coding, (e) theming. Finally, Holcomb and Davidson (2006) suggested six steps for such analysis and management. These steps are: (a) audio taping and concurrent note taking, (b) reflective journaling, (c) listening and amending, (d) preliminary analysis, (e) secondary analysis by external party, and (f) thematic review (Holcomb & Davidson, 2006).

By examining the four suggestions, I have created the following procedures: (a) organizing, (b) reflectivity, (c) listening, (d) coding, (e) analyzing, and (f) theming. In fact, these procedures agree with what was explained by Saldana (2016) coding is not a precise science; instead, it is primarily an interpretive act. The following paragraphs will highlight how each procedure will be implemented.

Organizing

Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research. They are scientists and artists in collecting their data; therefore, I adopted a written plan for where data would be stored, how data to be protected, how data to be transcribed, and how the notes would be complied. The plan included the timeline that details the different phases of data collection. By having organized data, I was able to reread them, reorganize them and prepare them for summary and analysis.

Reflectivity

Sutton and Austin (2015) pointed out that reflexivity requires researchers to reflect upon and clearly articulate their position and subjectivities, so that readers can better understand the filter through which questions were asked, data were gathered and analyzed, and findings were reported. Indeed, I did multiple reading for my notes as soon as possible. I kept reviewing more often and expanded on the impressions of the interaction with more comments and perceptions. Once I felt confident, I started my interpretation.

Listening

Holcomb and Davidson (2006) pointed out that the purpose of listening is to ensure that the notes provide an accurate reflection of the interaction. During each the phone and zoom interviews, I listened carefully to each participant. I took notes and I had read them before each participant to ensure I captured the right meaning for each question. By listening to them and I kept repeating their answers, I became confident that I reached an accurate data for each question.

Codes and Categories

Moustakas (1994) described the modified Van Kaam phenomenological research method of listing, creating preliminary groupings, considering reduction and elimination in order to generate effective procedures for coding and categorizing in order to discover emerging themes. The coding I used followed this process. The fundamental understanding of coding refers to the processes of assigning meaning to data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Laureate Education, 2016). It can be a word or phrase that explains and

describes life inside the data. As a qualitative researcher who has an interest in further research, I often asked the question about the best way to code. In fact, I had in mind two ways: (a) the traditional hand coding, and (b) the modern one where software was involved (Nelson, Burk, Knudsen, & McCall, 2018). Creswell (2014) described hand coding as being a time-consuming and challenging process, even for data from a few individuals. Also, Creswell (2014) explained that the basic idea of qualitative software programs is that using the computer is an efficient means to organize, sort, and search for information in text or image databases. Indeed, I utilized the two ways: (a) the traditional one that uses hand code and (b) the modern one where software was involved. I started coding traditionally since I was trained professionally for such practice; then, I used part of the modern way for further assistance like spreadsheet, charts, tables, and concept maps. Although the traditional way was time-consuming, I felt very comfortable to use it. I started first by reading each interview transcript several times; then, I used several techniques like highlighting, circling, coloring, writing notes, and questions in the margins (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Next, I used the Microsoft to create charts, tables, shapes, and graphs. After that, I compared the various answers and searched for patterns (Parameswaran et al., 2019). Because of this deeply engagement with the data, I was able to create categories for each major question (more explanation for that in Chapter 4).

Analyzing

The primary goal of data analysis is to be focused on and authentic to what the participants actually say, how they say it, and how they present their context of experiences and thoughts (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure a good quality

of analysis, I leaned to two processes. The first one I sought help from external party like colleagues in my profession and some experts in Middle Eastern studies. Their feedback contributed positively to my understanding of the process. The second process, I reviewed my methodology courses and used the internet like YouTube to educate myself more about data analysis and categorization. Because of these two adopted processes, I was able to revise and to adjust the names of some of the categories.

Theming

Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained that themes are summary statements, causal explanation, and conclusions; therefore, theming will enable researchers to have an explanation of why something happened, what does it mean, and how participants feel about the matter. To ensure a good practice for theming, I used each of the complete interviews, read all my coded data multiple times, regrouped them and combined them, and documented them. Having done that, I was able to discover the emerging themes and present the findings of my study in a coherent and meaningful way.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Patton (2015) explained that the capacity for astute pattern recognition drives qualitative analysis from beginning to end. Also, cited in Toma (2011), Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that qualitative researchers are expected to establish trustworthiness for their research findings by demonstrating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Toma, 2011). To take these notions into further understanding, Shenton (2004) provided four criteria: (a) credibility, which refers to internal validity, (b) transferability, which refers to generalizability, (c) dependability which refers to the

reliability, and (d) confirmability which refers to objectivity. From this, these criteria were needed to promote research quality, applying ethics, trustworthiness, and credibility. The next paragraphs will show how these criteria were demonstrated in my research study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research finding (Tracy, 2010). According to Tracy (2010), qualitative credibility is achieved through practices including thick description, triangulation, or crystallization, and multivocality and partiality. Ensuring trustworthiness promotes confidence for me that I did use the correct methods and measures for the intended purposes of my research. Hence, some strategies could ensure my research trustworthiness. I adopted the following: (a) the utilization of the correct methods and measure to reach the findings, (b) familiarize myself with the participants. Shenton (2004) explained that an early familiarization through engagement could promote comfortability between researchers and the participants, (c) my sampling was purposeful since it provided information-rich, (d) Honesty and preventive questions were enforced. Shenton (2004) explained that participants should not be forced to talk, nor should they be afraid if they participate, and (e) I worked closely with other colleagues, advisors, peers, and experts to ensure that I was in the right direction, adopting scrutiny, avoiding negative analysis, and obtain further feedback (Shenton, 2004; Toma, 2011).

Transferability

Transferability is achieved when readers feel that the story of the research overlaps with their situation (Tracy, 2010). Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained that transferability is how qualitative studies can be applicable, transferable to the broader context while still maintaining their context-specific richness. Tracy (2010) demonstrated that transferability drives resonance, where the researchers could influence and affect the readers of the study. Therefore, I intended, through my research, to provide readers with the possibility to transfer the aspects of the study design and findings by taking into consideration different contextual factors instead of attempting to replicate the design and findings.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Dependability in qualitative research entails that researchers have a reasoned argument for how they are collecting the data, and the data are consistent with their argument; therefore, the data expected to be dependable in the sense that they are answering the questions of the study. For my case, I created appropriate data collected plan to ensure that I met the requirements of the qualitative research. The created interview questions were relevant to the theme and consistent with the argument of the study. I reviewed each answer to ensure it was relevant to the proposed question. Therefore, the plan was well-articulated to confirm that I adopted reliable sources for data collection.

Confirmability

Confirmability is often described as the qualitative equivalent of the quantitative concept of objectivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers need to acknowledge and recognize how their biases and prejudices can influence the interpretations of the data. Useful methods to achieve confirmability include implementing triangulation strategies, researcher reflexivity processes, and external audits (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rudestam & Newton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). To ensure these practices for my research study, I sought help for more than one peer debriefing. Toma (2011) explained that once someone other than the researcher confirms data, confirmability is sustained.

Ethical Procedures

This study required IRB approval for data collection. I worked closely with my committee chair to grant such permission. It was granted in November 2020 (11-12-20-0697806). A consent agreement for each participant was emailed, as well. Also, I confirmed for the participants that their participation would remain completely anonymous.

Treatment of Participants

The selection of the participants relied on their experience with the government regime of Syria. All of them have experienced the Syrian regime from father to son. I ensured that they would understand that their participation in the study was voluntary. They were also be informed that their national and religious identities, names, and responses would remain confidential.

Treatment of Data

No one, except me, will access the collected data. The data is saved on several devices, such as my personal computer at home, my personal laptop, my thumb drive, and my cloud account. All these devices require a password, and they are in a safe place and encrypted. No public computer at work or elsewhere will be used for the collected data. Access to the data is limited to the researcher and should be kept for five years past the final dissertation approval.

Summary

I intended in this chapter to explain the research methods of this study. I highlighted the research design and rationale. Then, I explained my role as a researcher and how I dealt with bias and ethical issues. I also demonstrated my methods of participants' selection, data collection, and analysis. I showed the adopted plan for coding, organizing, and analyzing. The issues of trustworthiness, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were also given a high level of consideration. Finally, I showed my intention of treatment for both participants and data.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover, explore, and understand the various perspectives of a sample of Syrians in the U.S. diaspora about the reasons and conditions that they think continues to empower the Assad regime practice of state repression. The perspective of the Syrian opposition living in the U.S. diaspora provided the road for the discovery and the exploration. The main research question aimed to learn about the Syrian perception in the United States about the reasons and conditions that continued to empower the practices of Assad regime state repression.

The organization of this chapter contains an explanation for the study setting, demographics, data collection, and analysis. I describe the methods of recruiting the participants and how I conducted in-depth interviews. I describe the data analysis and how it was used to reach the result. I describe the coding process within the analysis to reach categories of responses which further analyzed into the emerging themes to understand the result. I include figures and tables to support such an explanation.

Out of this analysis I describe the emerging themes for the participants' responses when then led me to express the overall findings in terms of participants perceptions of the reasons and conditions that continue to empower the practices of Assad regime state repression. Both the evidence of trustworthiness and the research result are discussed. Finally, the chapter ends by having a summary and the transition for Chapter 5.

Setting

The ongoing epidemic of COVID-19 did not allow me to create a physical environment for this study. The concerns of safety and the requirements of social distance practices were highly adopted during each interview with the participants. Instead, I adopted an e-environment. Its boundaries were the physical geography of the U.S. Because of the e-environment, I was able to contact and conduct interviews via social media, emails, messengers, and phone calls to follow up questions and inquire further details. The setting ensured safety and social distance practices and did not cause any health issues for the participants or me. The e-environment was an appropriate option because of the epidemic challenges.

Demographics

Once I received the Walden University IRB's approval (11-12-20-0697806) on November 12, 2020, I began my recruitment journey. The use of technology was a priority to recruit and to contact the participants. The study included 15 participants between the ages of 25-60 (See Figure 4).

Figure 4

Participants Ages
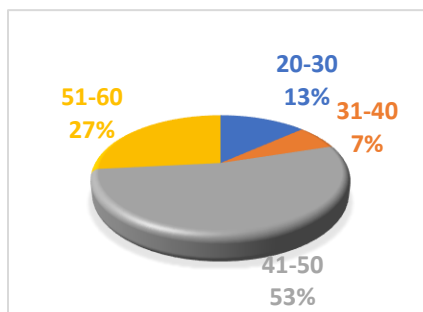
The participants were four females and 11 males (See Figure 5). There was no intention to rely on a certain number of either sex. The recruitment was not easy because of the nature of the study associated with fears and concerns of potential participants. I contacted several social centers for the Syrian community in the U.S. via emails, phone calls, and social media. Some of these centers were the Syrian American Council (SAC), the Syrian Forum USA (SFUSA), the Students Organize for Syria (SOS), and the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS).

Figure 5

Participants Gender
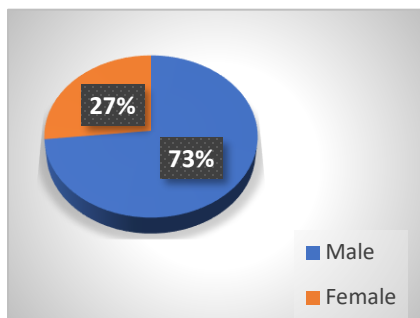
The target population was Syrian Americans. I also attempted to recruit participants through friends, students, and social media like LinkedIn and Facebook. The snowballing technique of asking participants for referrals was used as well. Some individuals accepted my invitation to participate, some did not, and some contacted me for further details. I received 20 acceptances; however, I ended with 15 participants for interviewing. All the participants lived in various regions in the U.S., like the East Coast, the Midwest, the Rocky Mountains, the Gulf Region, and the West Coast (See Figure 6). All had university or higher degrees (See Figure 7). Some held undergraduate degrees,

and some had graduate degrees between master's degrees and doctorates. All the participants were professionally occupied. They were academics, self-employed, community activists, and business executive officers (See Figure 8). Some were married, and some were single (See Figure 9). Some of the married participants had American spouses and lived in Syria for some time before moving back to the United States. Some had been detained in Syrian jails before they moved to the United States.

Figure 6

Participants Demographics
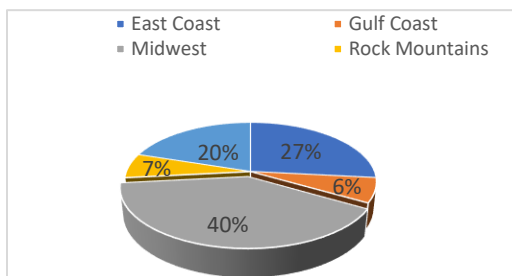
Figure 7

Level of Education
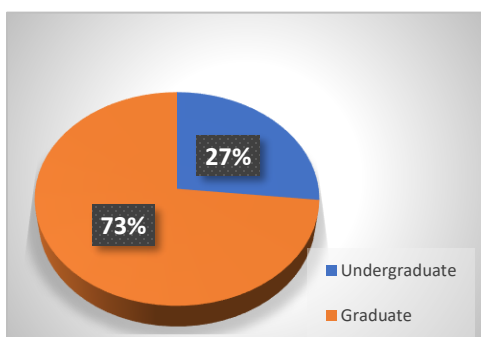
Figure 8

Professional Status
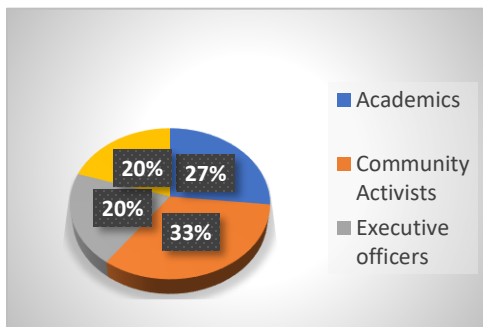
Figure 9

Participants' Marital Status
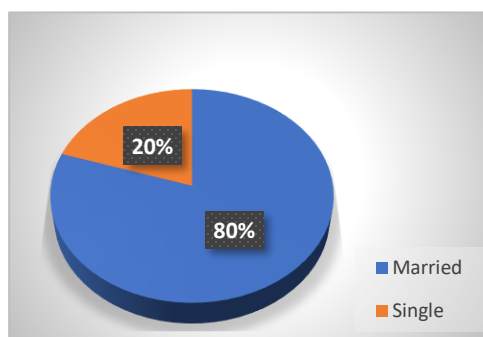
Data Collection

One of the study's primary concerns was to ensure the targeted population meets the meaning of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling ensures that participants selected have information to share that is strategically aligned with the purpose of the study, primary questions, and data collection (Patton, 2015). The original size of the sample was projected to be seven to 10 participants as long as it reached the level of saturation. This number jumped into 20 participants who agreed to consent and to be

interviewed. However, I filtered them down to 15 participants. The reason I excluded the other five because they were not profoundly associated with the meaning of purposeful sampling. Therefore, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews through which I reached the research study's level of saturation.

More importantly, rapport and harmony were highly considered. A successful interview required me to understand the importance of my interviewees. My interviewees needed to feel comfortable, respected, and highly regarded so they could contribute with the necessary information for my questions. Such feeling was achieved and generated trust and reflected positively on the research project. Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained that building trust between interviewers and interviewees will encourage participation and commitment to the research project. To ensure such an achievement, I called my participants more often, and I provided enough details and information to my study. I went over the consent form to explain their rights and their privacy. I stated to them that there would be no harm involved, nor were they obligated to report private information or anything that might lead to privacy violation.

In my letter of invitation, I proposed a $10 Gift Card for their participation. However, those who participated refused such gifts and showed their deep interests in the study. Although the participants were fluent in English, we spoke in both languages: Arabic and English. To some extent, I offered them the right to choose the language of conversation. They preferred English, except the greeting words were in the Arabic language.

The in-depth interview was the only method of data collection. The interviewing survey contained seven major questions with some probes, follow-up, and supportive questions. The survey was designed based on semi structured interviewing, which meant all the questions were open-ended (See Appendix). According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), interviewers are required to use ordinary conversational language to understand the questions. With helpful input from some experts who are colleagues, I carefully crafted my survey questions so that the interviewees were able to answer the questions in their own words. There were open-ended probes and follow up questions. Because of this interviewing strategy, I confirmed an excellent level of understandability between my participants and me. The major questions were crafted based on my own knowledge and experience of the situation in Syria and were divided around the following topics: (a) participants' perception of the current Syrian turmoil, (b) participants' shared experience with the regime, (c) participants interpretation of the regime domestic support and loyalty, (d) participants understanding for state repression, (e) participants' reflection on the regime external support, (f) participants' perspective for national settlement, and (g) participants' reflection on the role of how their living experience in the U.S. shaped their thought about the Syrian regime.

Once I received the IRB approval on November 12, 2020, I put my data collection plan into implementation. The plan contained the following steps: (a) I created a list for the potential interviewees, (b) I sent an email with the consent form and a letter of invitation, (c) I followed up with a phone call or messenger via social media, (d) I offered the interview formats whether it was preferred via email, phone call, or Zoom, (e)

participants were given the options of time and format and their responses determined the time and the format. I conducted interviews between November 14, 2020, and December 20, 2020. The average time for phone interviews and Zoom interview was 75-90 minutes. The three types of the interview format were utilized. I conducted eight interviews by phone, six interviews via email, and one interview via Zoom (See Figure 10). The utilization of these formats helped to save on time, budget, and efforts.

Figure 10

Interviewing Format
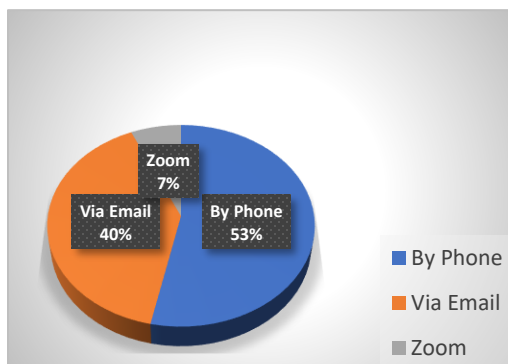
During the phone and the zoom interviews, participants took the time to answer each question. Before I started the major questions, I asked each participant about their academic background, level of education, years in the U.S., social status, and their nature profession of making a living. Then, I moved to the major questions, where I carefully listened to each answer. I took notes and read them back to each participant. It was a great idea for early debriefing. I felt a sense of humor involved at the end of some of the interviews, which helped me realize an adequate level of harmony and rapport. By the end of each interview, I asked whether they wanted to add up more, which some did.

Finally, I asked them whether they were interested in having a copy of the transcript for editing and future contact. All of them were happy and showed a great interest in transcripts and future communication.

The email six interviews via email (see Figure 10) did not cause any challenges. As a researcher, they were justified because of the surrounding environment of COVID-19, and the busy schedule of the participants. I observed that the email interviews were more convenient for participants since the interviews were not constrained by time like phone calls and zoom. I gave each email interview 7 days to reply. Before I started the email interviews, I made several phone calls to explain their rights and ensure that they were not obligated to participate. I also ensured that that they had the interest to reply within the time frame. I followed that with text message, a reminder phone call, and another reminder email (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015). Each sent email contained the consent form and the letter of invitation. I was successfully able to reach some of them after they replied to my survey. Once again, I ensured for them to remain a friend via social media like LinkedIn and Facebook. Some participants emailed me links, clips, and articles to educate me more about the current situation in Syria.

Data Analysis

My data analysis plan in Chapter three was a combination of numerous suggestions from Rubin and Rubin (2012), Ravitch and Carl (2016), Sutton and Austin (2015), and Holcomb and Davidson (2006). I included in my plan the following six procedures: (a) organizing, (b) reflectivity, (c) listening, (d) coding, (e) analyzing, and (f) theming. I carefully adopted each procedure. Creswell (2014) indicated that researchers

might be analyzing an interview collected earlier, writing memos that may ultimately be included as a narrative in the final report, and organizing the structure of the final report. That is what I did by not waiting until the end of the data collection to begin analysis. I started the data analysis plan procedures by the end of each interview. Overall, I implemented the six procedures like the following.

First, I organized my data collection by creating a document for each interview. Each interview was labeled with a certain number and a certain date. For example, one interview document was labeled "1.Inter Nov20" and another one was labeled "2.Inter Nov27". Therefore, I had 15 interview documents. To distinguish between the interviewing format, I created a list contains three categories. One category for email interviews; the second category for the phone interviews, and the final category for the zoom interview. While I was conducting the interviews during November and December of 2020, I was also organizing charts for the major questions. Since the survey contained seven major questions, I used an excel spreadsheet to create seven charts. Each chart was labeled with the number of each major question. For example, one chart was labeled "MQ1" which refers to "major question 1" another chart was labeled "MQ2". Therefore, I had seven charts where each chart contains the 15 participants' answers for each major question. To ensure protection, I stored all the documents in my thumb drive and on two of my computers in my professional library at home.

Second, to reflect on the data, I had to do multiple inductive reading for each chart. Some charts took more time than others. The purpose of the inductive reading was to reach insight, themes, and patterns (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Once I felt confident, I

interpreted each answer. I compared all answers for each question. I searched for patterns and again I interpreted each answer for a second time and sometimes for a third or fourth time. I excluded the answers that I felt were irrelevant. Once I explored the patterns, I felt it was easy for me to categorize the data and provide descriptive themes for them.

Third, although my data analysis plan contained the procedure of listening, I did not use audio recording since there was no face-to-face interview. Instead, I carefully listened to my participants during the phone and zoom interviews. Since I type professionally, I typed each interview via phone or zoom. I was able to follow up with them by the end of the interview which allowed me to ask them to repeat their statement and write more notes and ask for further explanation and comments. For the most part, I had to read for them what I typed to ensure that I captured the meaning of their answers. Since they were highly educated and good in the English language, I had no problem understanding them and enhance my understanding by repeating to them how did I understand their answers.

Fourth, the descriptive category refers to a summary of the primary topic of the excerpt that follows the same superscript (Saldana, 2016). Inspired by the modified van Kaam method of analyzing described by Moustakas (1994), I treated all the interview manuscripts equally. I reviewed each document several times, I went back for each chart to start the processing of qualitative coding. Since I have been familiar professionally with the traditional way and the modern way of coding and categorizing, I relied heavily on the traditional way and to some extent, I used some techniques of the modern way. I felt comfortable with the techniques for each way. Some techniques were highlighting,

circling, coloring, writing notes, and questions in the margins (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In the modern way where Microsoft was involved, I created charts, tables, shapes, and graphs. The excel spreadsheet was very helpful in that practice as well.

The processes of categorizing were not difficult, nor they were easy; rather, they were time-consuming and required a deep engagement. Coding involves several rounds of reading, various techniques of engagement, strategies, and tactics (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana 2014). I did multiple readings and I deeply studied the terms, the occurring phrases, and explored the patterns of the participation. I compared the various answers for each major question. These processes of multiple readings, highlighting terms and phrases, comparing answers to explore patterns enabled me to create categories for each major question (Myers, 2013).

Fifth, to ensure I had a good quality of work, I sought help from colleagues and some experts in Middle East politics. I reviewed the materials of my courses on qualitative methodology at Walden. I also used YouTube clips to further my understanding of categorization. The feedback of my colleagues and other experts of the Middle East contributed positively to my understanding of the process. This kind of engagement is called dialogic engagement where other researchers and experts share their knowledge and feedback (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After that, I went back to each chart to adjust the names of some categories and I start writing the thematic descriptive for each category.

Sixth, creating a thematic description for each category was the final procedure of the data analysis. I followed the modified van Kaam method described by Moustakas

(1994) to cluster the categories. Each of the seven major interview questions had equal numbers of categories. In other words, there are four categories for each major question. Each of the four categories has a thematic description to show an explanation for each one (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). All these themes emerged as a result of the responses of the participants. I created a figure to show how participants contributed to each theme (see figure 11 in the next section). This agrees with what has been known in categorizing and theming that "a picture is worth a thousand words" (Laureate Education, 2016).

I approached the data initially separated by the seven primary interview questions. The main idea from each question was expressed in a statement from the perspective of the participant. These main ideas statements were: (a) participants perception of the Syrian turmoil, (b) participants' shared experiences with the regime, (c) participants interpretation for the regime domestic support and loyalty, (d) participants' understanding of the state repression, (e) participants explanation for the regime external support, (f) participants' perspectives for national settlement, and (g) participants' reflection on the role of their living experience in the U.S. in shaping their thought about the regime.

These statements were shortened and expressed as topics to which the participants responded. These topics were: a) Syrian Turmoil, b) Shared Experience with Regime, c) Regime Domestic Support and Loyalty, d) State Repression, e) Regime External Support, f) National Settlement, g) The Living Experience in the U.S. Under each of these topics I coded the responses of participants by the thoughts they shared. I then grouped the thoughts of the participants into categories. This led me to themes within each of the topics. The following charts display this process.

Table 1

The Categories of Each Major Topic with the Shared Numbers of the Participants

Topics	Categories	Participants
1. Syrian Turmoil	External Involvement	10
	Psychological Impact	7
	Abused Civil Rights	13
	Internal Struggle	13
2. Shared Experience with Regime	Trading Freedom	3
	Painful Memories	9
	Government Oversight	9
	Limited Experience	4
3. Regime Domestic Support and Loyalty	Economic & Political Reasons	11
	Public Ignorance	1
	Minorities & Ideological Reasons	3
	Government Coercion	7
4. State Repression	Human Rights Abuse	10
	Political Fears	6
	Coercion	9
	Prevention	1
5. Regime External Support	Mutual Interests	14
	Regime Survival	3
	Crime Partnership	6
	Nature in Dictatorship	4
6. National Settlement	National Dialogue	4
	Impossible Settlement	8
	Regime Change	9
	Mediation	3
7. The Living Experience in the US	Understanding Democracy	13
	Understanding Autocracy	7
	No Impact	1
	The American Role	2

There were seven groups of major topics as a result of the seven interview questions. Each topic contained four categories. I derived from each group coding categories, which made each category contain the responses' frequency.

Participants Contribution for each Theme

Precise aligned categories emerged to form the themes. There were 28 categories in all, condensed into seven themes. In this section, I detail the number of participants who contributed to each category (See Figure 11).

Figure 11

The Emerged Themes from the Participants' Response

FIGURE 11: *THE EMERGED THEMES FROM THE PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES*
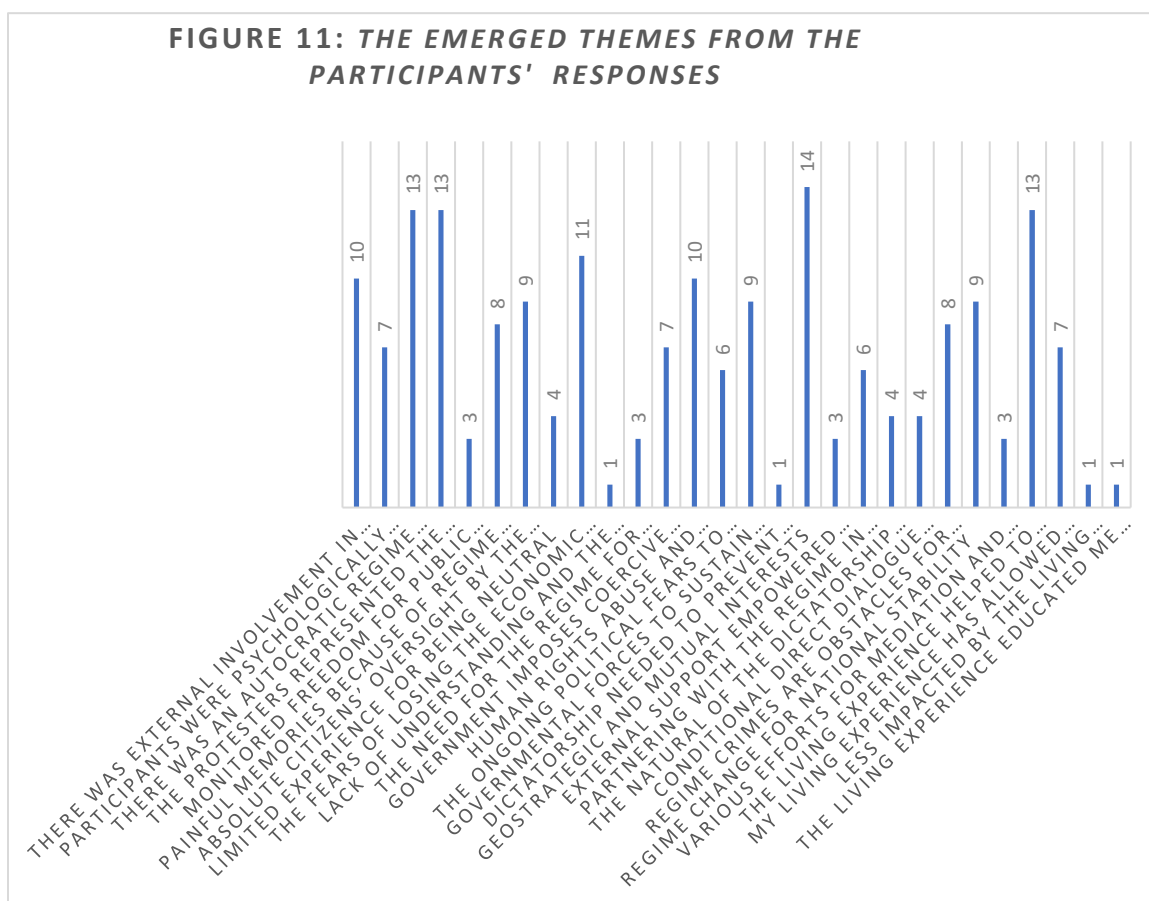
The highest perception of the participants was observed in the theme of the geostrategic and the mutual interest of the foreign actors, Iran and Russia, that contributed to empowering the regime. There were 14 participants included in this theme.

The second highest perception was observed in the following three themes: (a) regime abusive practices for civil rights, (b) the Syrian uprising was motivated by internal struggle for democratic demands, and (c) the living experience in the U.S. helped to understand how democracy function. Each of these three themes included 13 participants.

The third highest perception was observed in the regime investment theme in economic and political privileges to generate domestic support and loyalty. There were 11 participants included in this theme.

The fourth highest perception was observed in the following themes: (a) the external involvement in the Syrian civil war and (b) the national humiliation and the declining of people's dignity because of the ongoing turmoil. Each of these two themes included 10 participants.

The fifth highest perception was observed in the following three themes: (a) there was absolute control of the government to oversight people, (b) governmental policies to sustain people domination, and (c) regime change needed to create national stability. Each one of these two themes included 9 participants.

The sixth highest perception was observed in the following two themes: (a) the painful memories because of the regime brutality, and (b) because of regime crimes, the national settlement was impossible. Each one of these two themes included 8 participants.

The seventh highest perception was observed in the following three themes (a) the psychological impact of the current turmoil, (b) there were coercive policies to force national loyalty, and (c) the living experience in democracy shaped their thought about the Assad autocratic system. Each one of these three themes included seven participants.

The eighth highest perception was observed in the following two themes: (a) the ongoing political fears to prevent future challenges to the regime, (b) foreign powers like Iran and Russia partnered with the regime crimes against the people. Each one of these two themes included six participants.

The ninth highest perception was observed in the following three themes: (a) limited experience with regime, (b) external support was nature in a dictatorship, and (c) conditional dialogue needed for a national settlement. Each one of these three themes included four participants.

The tenth highest perception was observed in the following four themes: (a) trading political freedom with public goods, (b) the regime needed to protect minorities and other ideological affiliation, (c) external support empowered regime survival, and (d) the need for a transitional mechanism for mediation and peacebuilding. Each one of these three themes included three participants.

The eleventh highest perception was observed in the following four themes: (a) lack of understanding and the culture of ignorance, (b) dictatorship needed to prevent civil violence, (c) less impacted by the living experience, and (d) the living experience highlighted the role of the U.S. in the Syria conflict. Each one of these four themes included one participant.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Toma (2011) indicated that qualitative researchers are expected to reach credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The four of them makes the criteria of validity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The evidence of trustworthiness is ensured based on the following. First, qualitative credibility is related to the research design and the researcher's instruments and data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I carefully followed the required instructions and fully adopted some of the participants' feedback, two of my colleagues, and a methodology expert. The study setting, demographics, and the instruments of the data collection have been documented.

Next, qualitative transferability was completely achieved. Qualitative studies are expected to apply to a broader context (Ravitch & Carl 2016: Shenton, 2004). Because of the rich data and the descriptive themes, this study can be applied to a broader context. It can help other researchers to consider a study for the Syrians in diaspora elsewhere in the world and reaching new findings to promote a new just regime.

Additionally, qualitative dependability was also ensured. Qualitative studies are considered to be dependable and consistent in the research argument and questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shenton, 2004). The data analysis management was well-articulated and reviewed several times to confirm the collected data. The methods of analysis were appropriate to offer an accurate answer to the study questions.

Lastly, the qualitative confirmability was clearly reached. The qualitative studies' findings need to be confirmed without biased interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Shenton, 2004). There was no personal interpretation on my end. To ensure the study's

objectiveness, I sought help and feedback from two experts in Middle Eastern politics, one methodology expert, and reviewed other studies related to qualitative research in Middle Eastern politics and sociology.

Study Results (Findings)

This section presents the results of the study and is organized around the questions asked of participants, the supportive questions, and selected responses from participants. The 15 participants were asked the same questions (See Appendix). The questions are expressed here as seven major topics:

1. Participants' perception for the current turmoil in Syria

2. Participants' shared experience with the Assad Regime.

3. Participants' interpretation for regime domestic support and loyalty.

4. Participants' understanding for state repression.

5. Participants' explanation for the external support for the regime.

6. Participants' perspective for national settlement.

7. The role of participants' living experience in the U.S. in shaping their thought about the regime.

The following paragraphs explain the themes for each of the seven major topics to which participants responded. They contain tables of thematic description and categories. Each table follows with an analysis of how participants' responses were associated with each category.

Topic 1: Turmoil in Syria

Four themes emerged (See Table 2) from the responses of participants. First, participants believed that current turmoil became a very complicated issue because of foreign actors' involvement. Ten participants showed their deep concern for foreign involvement in the Syrian turmoil. One participant stated that "The keys to the conflict are in the hands of regional and international countries such as Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar, Israel, America, Iran, Hezbollah". Another participant supported this statement by stating, "There were other countries became involved with the situation like Iran, Russia, and other Arab countries like Saudi Arabia. Each one looked on its allies".

Second, the current turmoil created a psychological impact on the participants since they witnessed humiliation in human dignity, fears, and powerlessness. Seven participants showed how they were psychologically impacted. One participant stated, "The people became without dignity, or value, any social standard. They feel powerless and must follow the orders of the regime". Another participant agreed with that and stated, "It is sad and beyond comprehension and unspeakable because of human tragedy and on error disregard of the Syrian human lives."

Third, the regime's abuse of civil rights showed the authentic nature of the autocratic system. Thirteen participants described the regime's abusive practices that reached not only the protesters but also their families and communities during the turmoil. One participant said, "The regime has adopted a collective punishment to prevent further popular demands; protesting is a very basic thing; every human has the

right to protest." Another participant stated, " the regime took harsh actions against the peaceful protesters, killed thousands and jailed hundreds of thousands for political reasons." Another participant agreed with that and said, "Due to lack of international intervention on the side of protesters, the regime was able to commit massacres against civilians".

Fourth, the Syrian turmoil was driven by the internal struggle for democratic demands. Thirteen participants agreed that there was a peaceful protesting for political, social, and economic reforms. One participant stated, "People ask for democratic states and aimed to improve their economic status since there is a high level of corruption."

Syrian Turmoil

The emerging themes of the participants' perception of the current turmoil were the following: (a) there was external involvement in the Syrian civil war, (b) participants' were psychologically impacted by the humiliation of the human dignity, fears, and the powerlessness, (c) there was an autocratic regime heavily abused the civil rights of the people, and (d) the protesters represented the internal struggle for democratic demands.

Table 2 displays the categories of the perceptions of the participants concerning the current Syrian turmoil. These categories are: (a) External Involvement, (b) Psychological Impact, (c) Abused Civil Rights, and (d) Internal Struggle. Out of these categories I constructed thematic statements and they are in the table.

Table 2

Participants' Perception of the Syrian Turmoil

Topic	Themes	Categories	Response	Percentage
Syrian Turmoil	1. There was external involvement in the Syrian civil war	1. External Involvement	P1, P2, P3, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15	67%
	2. Participants were psychologically impacted by the humiliation of human dignity, fears, and powerlessness,	2. Psychological Impact	P1,P4,P5,P7,P8,P12, P15	47%
	3. There was an autocratic regime that heavily abused the civil rights of the people	3. Abused Civil Rights	P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7, P8,P9,P10,P11,P12, P14, P15	87%
	4. The protesters represented the internal struggle for democratic demands	4. Internal Struggle	P1,P2,P3,P4,P6,P8, P9,P10,P11,P12,P13,P14, P15	87%

The illustration of Table 2 suggests that the percentage of the participants who expressed their perception for each categorized coding. For example, 67% of the participants (n=10) believed that the current Syrian turmoil was associated with external forces; the current turmoil psychologically impacted 47% of the participants (n=7); 87% of the participants (n=13) believed that there was a high level of civil rights violation, and 87% (n=13) believed that internal demands for democratic reforms drove the current turmoil.

Topic 2: Shared Experience with the Regime

All participants were asked a question whether they shared any type of experience with the regime. Their answers were wealthy with information. After I reviewed the transcripts, four themes emerged (See Table 3). First, participants indicated that to live in Syria, you must trade political freedom with public goods' benefits. Three participants agreed that the government offered a health care system, free education, and other forms of needed necessities in return; they do not demand political freedom. One participant indicated, "Syrian people had free health care and free education, and because of this no need to engage in politics". Another participant stated, "in Syria if you do not involve in politics, you will not be in trouble; I got free education." Another participant said, " government provide public goods to limit the freedom; otherwise, you are in trouble with the government".

Second, eight participants shared their painful memories because of regime brutality. Some of the painful memories were a combination of the father and the son regimes. One participant indicated, " when I was living in Damascus, I felt a state of terror; no law or order and no support if you ever challenge the system of the regime". A Group of participants agreed with that and shared their stories about how some family members disappeared, were jailed, and killed. One participant discussed how two of his uncles were assassinated by the regime's intelligence service "on my father's side, 2 uncles, were killed by the regime since they were suspected to be members of the Syrian Free Army". Another participant discussed a shared experience " I was born in 1963 and I live the two regimes all of my life. They shared the interest of creating death camps like

Tadmor and Sednaya; they are five stars prison". Another horrible experience stated by one of the participants, "Most of my family had to move out into neighboring state like Jordan. Our properties, homes no longer around".

Third, there was ongoing oversight by the government to monitor daily public activities. Nine participants shared their experiences. One participant indicated one family member was arrested in his worship place, and the other was arrested when he was going to his classroom at Damascus University. Another academic participant, who I had to mask his academic institution to protect his family in Syria, stated that he was arrested and jailed because he was affiliated with Human Right Watch "I was a professor at the University of X, and I was working with the Human Rights watch; I was arrested and terminated from my position".

Fourth, some participants shared limited experience with the regime since they moved to the U.S. in their early younghood; however, 4 of them had family members who were victims of the regime. One participant moved to the U.S. when he was a teenager, but his cousin was killed for being a Facebook activist during the uprising "I lost my cousin who organized a peaceful protest through Facebook:" Another participant was born in the U.S.; however, she kept visiting Syria to maintain the family roots; she felt was monitored by the government " I was traveling in Syria I pointed out my hand for a question; my cousin had to stop me from keep doing such thing since I could be arrested for doing that; I felt everyone was monitored in Syria."

The Shared Experience with the Regime

The emerging themes of participants' shared experiences with the regime

explained as the following: (a) monitored freedom for public goods exchange, (b) painful

memories because of regime brutality, (c) absolute citizens' oversight by the government,

and (d) limited experience for being neutral.

Table 3 displays the categories of the participants' shared experience with the

regime. These categories are: (a) Trading Freedom, (b) Painful Memories, (c)

Government Oversight, and (d) Limited Experience. Out of these categories, I

constructed thematic statements and they are in the table.

Table 3

Participants' Shared Experiences with Regime

Topic	Themes	Categories	Response	Percentage
Shared Experience with Regime	1. Monitored freedom for public goods exchange	1. Trading Freedom	P1,P10,P13	20%
	2. Painful memories because of regime brutality	2. Painful Memories	P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P8, P12, P15	60%
	3. Absolute citizens' oversight by the government	3. Government Oversight	P3,P4,P5,P6,P7,P8, P9,P12,P15	60%
	4. Limited experience for being neutral	4. Limited Experience	P4,P9,P11,P15	27%

The illustration of Table 3 suggests that the percentage of the participants who

expressed their perception for each categorized coding. For example, 20% of the

participants ($n=3$) believed, based on their experience, there was an obligation to trade

public goods with political freedom, 60% of the participants ($n=9$) experienced bad

memories with the regime either because they lost family members, or they were jailed in the regime's prisons; 60% indicated (*n=9*) they were entirely monitored in several places in their life by government security agencies while 27% (*n=4*) had minimal experience with the regime since they did not engage with any activities challenge the regime.

Topic 3: Regime Domestic Support and Loyalty

All participants were asked a question to explain the regime's domestic support and loyalty. Four themes emerged as a result of their reflection. First, regime domestic support and loyalty resulted from the economic and political privileges and the fears of losing such benefits. Eleven participants had the same belief for such an explanation (See Table 4). One participant indicated, "Because of fears of the change; people who have been benefited economically and politically afraid to lose the privileges." Another support for this quotation came from another participant by saying, " many people live in the fruit of the regime which greatly benefited the regime."

Second, the domestic support and loyalty for the regime were attributed to ignorance's lack of understanding and culture. There was only one participant for that " The phenomenon of supporting Bashar al-Assad is, in fact, nothing more than ignorance and cultural apathy."

Third, the tendency of the various minorities and the ideological affiliation were other sources of regime domestic support and loyalty. Three participants provided such an explanation (See Table 4). One of them stated, " the regime enjoys the strong support of a segment of the population who are willing to fight and die for it, either ideological,

material or sectarian reasons." Another participant stated, "the regime is the sole protector of all minorities amongst all fighting factions."

Fourth, the government adopted coercive policies to sustain national loyalty. Seven participants agreed with such an explanation (See Table 4). One participant stated, "people are afraid to speak, pressured to show loyalty, and the regime's propaganda makes it seem as if there is popular support." Another quotation, "The people have no choice; they have to say what the regime need them to say." Another participant stated, "I do not agree that Bashar has popular support; we were forced to show some loyalty."

Regime Domestic Support and Loyalty

The emerging themes of participants interpretation for regime domestic support and loyalty explained as the following: (a) the fears of losing the economic and the political privileges, (b) lack of understanding and ignorance in politics, (c) the need for the regime for minorities' rights protections, and (d) government imposes coercive loyalty.

Table 4 displays the categories of the participants' explanations for regime domestic support and loyalty. These categories are: (a) Economic and Political Reasons, (b) Public Ignorance, (c) Minorities and Ideological Affiliation, and (d) Government Coercion. Out of these categories, I constructed thematic statements and they are in the table.

Table 4

Participants' Explanation for the Regime Domestic Support and Loyalty

Topic	Themes	Categories	Response	Percentage
Regime Domestic Support & Loyalty	1. The fears of losing economic and political privileges	1. Economic & Political Reasons	P1,P4,P5,P6,P7,P8, P9,P11,P12,P13,P14	73%
	2. Lack of understanding and ignorance in politics	2. Public Ignorance	P6	7%
	3. The need for the regime for minorities' rights protections	3. Minorities & Ideological Reasons	P1,P6,P14	20%
	4. The government imposes coercive loyalty	4. Government Coercion	P2,P3,P4,P8,P9,P10, P15	47%

The illustration of Table 4 suggests that the percentage of the participants who expressed their perception for each categorized coding. For example, 73% of the participants (*n*=11) referred to the regime domestic support and loyalty because of both economic and political advantages; 7% (*n*=1) believed the domestic support was a result of the culture of ignorance and lack of understanding; 20% (*n*=3) referred the domestic support and loyalty to the regime because of ideological affiliation and minorities interest in regime protection, and 47% (*n*= 7) stated that public support to the regime came as a result of fears and government coercive policies.

Topic 4: Understanding State Repression

All participants were asked a question to explain their understanding of state repression. Four themes emerged as a result of their explanation. The first emerged theme was human rights abuse and the humiliation of human dignity. Ten participants supported

such an explanation (See Table 5). One of them stated, "When citizens cannot express basic freedoms; Syria has all forms of state repression." Another quotation, "State repression is the system of abusing and killing people." Another participant stated, "State repression for me means that when the government represses people property, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Second, the meaning of state repression was explained as the ongoing political fears of the public to prevent any form of challenges to the regime. Six participants expressed their understanding based on this theme (See Table 5). One participant stated, "State repression is another way to control people with terror and force to keep living in fears and not to challenge the system." Another participant explained, "Its systemic practices to police everyone by everyone."

Third, state repression referred to the adopted forces of government to dominate people's various aspects. Nine participants expressed their understanding based on this theme (See Table 5). One participant indicated, "The practice of the state repression has been expanded to included checking and oversight the citizens of the nation abroad." Another participant stated, " the government completely controls the people's lives and does not allow them to mobilize or together; if you do other than that, you will be completely gone."

Fourth, state repression was the interest in having a dictatorship to prevent potential civil violence. One participant explained that in a country with diverse minorities and ethnic groups like Syria, a dictatorship was needed to avoid civil violence. This participant stated, "If there is a powerful regime, unity is there; if you move the

regime, the system will be disintegrated. I personally would rather have an authoritarian regime rather than having a civil war".

Understanding State Repression

The emerging themes of participants interpretation for state repression explained as the following: (a) human rights abuse and humiliation for human dignity, (b) ongoing fears to ensure regime protection, (c) governmental forces to sustain national domination, and (d) dictatorship needed to prevent national disintegration.

Table 5 displays the categories of the participants' interpretation of state repression. These categories are: (a) Human Rights Abuse, (b) Political Fears, (c) Coercion, and (d) Prevention. Out of these categories, I constructed thematic statements and they are in the table.

Table 5

Participants' Understanding of State Repression

Topic	Themes	Categories	Response	Percentage
Understanding of state repression	1. Human rights abuse and humiliation for human dignity	1. Human Rights Abuse	P1,P3,P4,P5,P6,P8, P10, P12,P14,P15	67%
	2. The ongoing political fears to prevent challenges to the regime	2. Political Fears	P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P12	40%
	3. Governmental forces to sustain people's domination.	3. Coercion	P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7, P9,P11,P12	60%
	4. Dictatorship is needed to prevent national disintegration.	4. Prevention	P13	7%

The illustration of Table 5 suggests that the percentage of the participants who expressed their perception for each categorized coding. For example, 67% of the participants (*n*=10) believed that state repression was characterized by human rights abuse; 40% (*n*=6) believed that state repression was associated with political fears and 60% (*n*=9) believed that state repression was described as the practice of coercive government policies. In comparison, 7% (*n*=1) state repression was necessary to prevent civil conflict.

Topic 5: Regime External Support

All participants were asked a question to reflect on the regime's external support, more particularly from Russia and Iran. Four themes emerged as a result of their reflection (See Table 6). First, there were geostrategic and mutual interests involved between the Syrian regime and both Russia and Iran. Fourteen participants agreed with this theme. One of them explained, "the Russian and Iranian intervention is not aimed at the interest of the Syrians, but rather is to achieve strategic interests," and other participant stated, "there is a historical support from both Russia and Iran to maintain their influences in the Middle East."

Second, the external support, Russia and Iran, served for regime survival. Three participants supported this theme. One of them stated, " Without the external support from the Russian and the Iranian, the regime would not survive."

Third, the regime's external support generated a partnership between Russia and Iran to commit a crime against humanity. Three participants reflected on such a partnership. One stated, "They are basically criminal regime to keep supporting the Assad

regime; they have blood on their hand because of their support; they should be dragged to the International Criminal Court."

Fourth, external support was the nature of the dictatorship system. Four participants agreed with that theme. One participant pointed out " they are naturally supporting each other for a long time."

Regime External Support

The emerging themes of participants' interpretation for regime's external support are explained as the following: (a) geostrategic and mutual interests, (b) external support empowered regime survival, (c) partnering with the regime in crime against humanity, and (d) the nature of the dictatorship system.

Table 6 displays the categories of the perceptions of the participants/ interpretation of the regime's external support. These categories are: (a) Mutual Interests, (b) Regime Survival, (c) Crime Partnership, and (d) Nature in Dictatorship. Out of these categories I constructed thematic statements and they are in the table.

Table 6

Participants Interpretation for the Regime External Support

Topic	Themes	Categories	Response	Percentage
Regime external support	1. Geostrategic and mutual interests	1. Mutual Interests	P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7,P8,P9,P10, P11,P13,P14,P15	93%
	2. External support empowered regime survival.	2. Regime Survival	P7, P14, P15	20%
	3. Partnering with the regime in crime against humanity	3. Crime Partnership	P7,P9,P11,P12,P14, P15	40%
	4. The nature of the dictatorship system	4. Nature in Dictatorship	P3,P8,P11,P13	27%

The illustration of Table 6 suggests that the percentage of the participants who expressed their perception for each categorized coding. For example, 93% of the participants (n=14) interpreted regime external support, more particularly from Russia and Iran, due to mutual strategic interests. In comparison, 20% (n=3) interpreted regime's external support helped the regime to survive, 40% (n=6) interpreted regime external support to be a source for war crimes partnership between the regimes of Syria, Russia, and Iran, and 27 % (n=4) considered the external support a natural relationship between the various systems of the dictatorship (Syria, Russia, and Iran).

Topic 6: Participants' Perspectives for National Settlement

All participants were asked a question to state their perspectives for any potential national settlement. Four themes emerged as a result of their views (See Table 7). First, a conditional dialogue was proposed to create negotiations between the regime and the opposition groups. Four participants agreed with this theme. One of them stated, "The best way is to stop the military operation, withdraw foreign forces, enter into political negotiations, work to return the displaced to their homeland, and work to rebuild Syria."

Second, the regime crimes are obstacles for a national settlement. Eight participants agreed with that theme. One participant pointed out, "there is no settlement at all. It has been so much bloodshed, misplaced for people, and destruction for the country".

Third, regime change is needed for national stability. Nine participants expressed their interest in such a move. One participant pointed out, " the best settlement is to let the Assad step down and have the people start a new way."

Fourth, the national settlement required international collaboration. Three participants believed in international mediation for national settlement and stability. One participant pointed out, "you may create a transnational group for mediation and will help to create trust between the conflicting parties."

National Settlement

The emerging themes of participants perspectives for the Syrian national settlement explained as the following: (a) conditional direct dialogue between the regime and the opposition groups, (b) regime crimes were obstacles for national settlement, and

(c) regime change for national stability, and (d) various forms of mediation and peacebuilding.

Table 7 displays the categories of the perceptions of the participants' perspectives for national settlement. These categories are: (a) National Dialogue, (b) Impossible Settlement, (c) Regime Change, and (d) Mediation. Out of these categories, I constructed thematic statements and they are in the table.

Table 7

Participants' Perspectives for the Syrian National Settlement

Topic	Themes	Categories	Response	Percentage
National settlement	1. Conditional direct dialogue between the regime and the opposition groups	1. National Dialogue	P1,P5,P6,P7	27%
	2. Regime crimes are obstacles for national settlement	2. Impossible Settlement	P2,P3,P4,P9,P10, P11,P12,P15	53%
	3. Regime change for national stability	3. Regime Change	P2,P3,P4,P7,P8,P 9, P10,P11,P15	60%
	4. Various forms for mediation and peacebuilding	4. Mediation	P12,P13,P14	60%

The illustration of Table 7 suggests that the percentage of the participants who expressed their perception for each categorized coding. For example, 27% of the participants (*n*=4) indicated the need for a conditional dialogue to create a national settlement and end people's misery. In comparison, 53% (*n*=8) showed that national settlement was impossible as long as the Assad regime in power, 60% (*n*=9) showed a tendency for regime change through international collaboration to create national stability

in Syria. Only 20% (*n*=3) believed in peacebuilding mediation to end the Syrian misery and create national stability.

Topic 7: Participants' Living Experience in the US

All participants were asked a question to reflect on how their living experience in the U.S. shaped their thought about the Assad regime. Four themes emerged as a result of their experiences (See Table 8). First, the living experience in the U.S. helped the participants understand how democracy functions. 13 of the participants showed by understanding democracy; it can be applied in Syria to end the dictatorship system. One participant pointed out, "there is the true essence of freedom, democracy, and a good experience that can be so incomprehensible to understand Syria's dictatorship."

Second, living experienced allowed the participants to understand the authoritarian system's essence. Seven participants became very grateful for such an understanding. One of them pointed out, "living in the U.S. gave my appreciation of how people of conflicting political interests can still live together and agree to live by the same electoral rules. It showed me how dissenters could be possible without state repression or political instability".

Third, there was no impact on the living experience on one of the participants "I do not think this experience has affected me. We know what freedom is; when you saw more freedom; I am not really impressed; it is supposed to be people rights". Fourth, the living experience allowed one participant to understand the American role in the Syrian conflict "being in the U.S. has made me think about the role of the U.S. and western powers in Syria."

The Living Experience in the US

The emerging themes of participants reflection for their living experience in the U.S. and how their experienced shaped their thought about the Assad regime explained as the following: (a) the living experience helped to understand how democracy function, (b) the living experience enabled to understand the authoritarian system better, (c) less impacted by the living experience, and (d) the living experience demonstrated the role of the U.S. in the conflict.

Table 8 displays the categories of how the living experience of the participants in the US shaped their thoughts about the Assad regime. These categories are: (a) Understanding Democracy, (b) Understanding Autocracy, (c) No Impact, and (d) The American Role. Out of these categories I constructed thematic statements and they are in the table.

Table 8

Role of the Participants' Living Experience in the U.S. in Shaping Their Thought About the Regime

Topic	Themes	Categories	Response	Percentage
The Living Experience in the U.S.	1. The living experience helped to understand how democracy function	1. Understanding Democracy	P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7, P8,P9,P10,P11,P12,P13	87%
	2. The living experience generated a better awareness of the authoritarian system	2. Understanding Autocracy	P2,P5,P8,P9, P10,P11,P12	47%
	3. Less impacted by the living experience.	3. No Impact	P15	7%
	4. The living experience helped to learn about the U.S. role in the conflict	4. The American Role	P14	13%

The illustration of Table 8 suggests that the percentage of the participants who expressed their perception for each categorized coding. For example, 87% of the participants (*n*=13) reflected positively on their living experience in the U.S. by indicating a good understanding of how democracy works and how much needed for Syria. In comparison, 47% (*n*=7) indicated that their living experience in the U.S. sustained their understanding of the system of dictatorship. The democratic system did

not impact only 7% (*n*=1) in the U.S. while 13% (*n*=2), because of their living experience in the U.S., were able to understand the played role of the U.S. in the Syrian conflict.

The previous tables (2-8) displayed that each topic contained a group of four themes due to the participants' responses. The extensive reviewing of the interview transcripts and observing the participants' common patterns were the foundation to create all these themes. The following paragraphs explained the four themes for each of the seven major questions. After that, I describe the participants' contribution thought in each theme where I had to consolidate the common patterns of themes to explore the findings. Therefore, seven findings were explored. I will now briefly summarize the findings.

Summary of Findings

There were 28 emerged themes from this study. They can be consolidated to explore the findings perception of the sampling Syrians in the U.S. diaspora. Each of the major questions also contributed to these findings. Some of the findings received a contribution from more than one of the major questions. Table 9 displays these findings with areas of the major questions contributed for each finding.

Table 9

The Findings Perception of the Sampling Syrians in the US Diaspora

Finding Number	Finding Description	Topics of Major Questions
F# 1	National support and domestic loyalty through investment in economic and political privileges.	Participants' thoughts about domestic support
F# 2	Policing public loyalty to prevent popular demands.	Participants' shared experience with the regime and participants' living experience in the US
F# 3	The regime fully employed the national resources to be tools for state terrorism implementation.	Participants' shared experience with the regime
F# 4	State repression was a legacy of the continuation of the system of rivalry between the regime and the dissidents.	Participants' thoughts about the current turmoil and participants' thoughts about state repression
F# 5	The necessity of the regime to prevent the national disintegration of Syria because of the ethnic and ideological differences.	Participants' thoughts about domestic support and participants' thoughts about state repression
F# 6	Regime change is a widespread desire because of the ongoing public aggravation	Participants' thoughts about national settlement
F# 7	The continuation of the external support empowered the regime's survival and the practices of state repression.	Participants' thought about the external support

The first finding is that the regime successfully generated national support through a variety of economic and political investments. One major question contributed to this finding was the participants' thought about domestic support. The second finding is that the regime has policed public loyalty to prevent popular demands. Two major questions contributed to this finding: (a) participants' shared experience with the regime, (b) participants' living experience in the US. The third finding is that the regime fully employed the national resources to be tools for state terrorism implementation. One major question that contributed to this finding was also the participants' shared experience with the regime. The fourth finding is that state repression was a legacy of the

continuation of the system of rivalry between the regime and the dissenters. Two major

questions contributed to this finding: (a) participants' thought about the current turmoil

and (b) participants' thoughts about state repression. The fifth finding is the necessity of

the regime to prevent the national disintegration of Syria because of the ethnic and

ideological differences. Two major questions contributed to this finding: (a) participants'

thoughts about the domestic support and (b) participants' thoughts about state repression.

The sixth finding is that regime change is a widespread desire because of the ongoing

public aggravation. One major question contributed to this finding the question of the

participants' thoughts about national settlement. The seventh finding is that the

continuation of the external support empowered the regime's survival and the practices of

state repression. Two major questions contributed to this finding: (a) participants'

thoughts about the current turmoil and (b) participants' thoughts about the external

support.

Summary of Chapter

In this chapter, I described the methodological procedures of the research study. I

covered the setting, demographics, and the methods of data collection and analysis. I used

in-depth interviews as the primary source of data collection. I conducted 15 interviews

where each interviewee answered the seven major questions. The seven major questions

focused on areas of topics of the current turmoil, shared experience with the regime,

regime domestic loyalty, state repression characteristics, regime external support, the

possibility of the national settlement, the role of the living experience in the U.S. in

shaping participants' thought about the regime. The answers of all the interviewees

suggested varieties of understanding, which generated 28 themes and coding categories. The emerging themes and the coding categories were utilized to explore the research findings. Since all the findings were relatively similar in themes, I had to consolidate them and categorize them into seven findings.

I move to Chapter 5 to interpret the research findings based on the STF explained in Chapter 2. I will address both the limitations and the recommendations of the study. I move, finally, to suggest and conclude my vision for the expected positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the perspective of a sample of the Syrians in the U.S. diaspora about the conditions and the reasons that empowered the Assad regime's practices of state repression. The nature of this study was a qualitative method with a case study design. The rationale behind the case study selection was that case studies have a rich tradition in the literature that can be used for data collection (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The study also relied on both semistructured interviews as sources of data collection and qualitative analysis for theming and coding. The interview questions were open-ended questions which encouraged the interviewees to speak their mind in their own words and terms (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The type of sampling was a purposeful one since the participants sociologically and psychologically shared their living experience with the regime before moving to the U.S. for varieties of reasons.

I summarized the explored findings of this study as the following: (a) the regime successfully generated national support through a variety of economic and political investments, (b) the regime has policed public loyalty to prevent popular demands, (c) the regime fully employed the national resources to be tools for state terrorism implementation, (d) state repression was a legacy of the continuation of the system of rivalry between the regime and the dissenters, (e) the necessity of the regime to prevent the national disintegration of Syria because of the ethnic and ideological differences, (e) regime change is a widespread desire because of the ongoing public aggravation, and (f)

the continuation of the external support empowered the regime's survival and the practices of state repression.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study confirmed the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 that state repression was characterized by the brutal responses of the regimes to quell their dissents, violate human rights, impose national domination, and ensure their permanent status in power (Aguilar & Kovras, 2019; Christensen, 2017; DeMeritt, 2016; Licht & Allen, 2018; Ritter & Conard, 2016; Truex, 2019; Wright & Moorthy, 2018).

Researchers who have studied government and state repression recommended further research to explore the regimes dynamic and strategies in power, protesters' motives to challenge the regimes, regimes' deterrence policies, forms of violence, the effectiveness of repression, and the unexpected outcomes because of the interaction between the regimes and the dissents (Dragu, 2017; De Jaegher & Hoyer, 2019; Heijs, 2018; Honari, 2018; Regilme Jr., 2018). More importantly, there were no research recommendations to explore the dissenters' perception of regime practices of state repression in the diaspora. This study came with a new approach to study state repression that has never been recommended by researchers of state repression before. It is a focused approach to the Syrians' perceptions in the U.S. diaspora concerning the reasons and conditions that empowered the Syrian regime's state repression practices. The study's findings of these perceptions are the source of the extended knowledge of state repression.

Extension of Knowledge

Although the reviewed literature contained rich information for various categories of the utilization of state repression, there was a gap associated with what unknown to the researchers and scholars of government that state repression is an outcome of a rival system between the dissenters and the regimes. Because of the rivalry system, the regimes respond violently to counter the dissenters' challenges (Beger & Hill Jr., 2019). Such response attracts foreign actors to interfere and shape the violence between the regimes and their dissents. Foreign actors' interference is also determined based on the mutual interests between one part of the foreign actors and the regime, and the other part of the foreign actors and the dissenters (Hinnebusch, 2020). This problematic interference promotes state repression into a high level of violence described as state terrorism. This dissertation's findings generate an extended knowledge of the practices and the various characteristics of state repression.

There are five ways to summarize the extended knowledge of state repression based on exploring the Syrians' perceptions (See Table 10).

Table 10

The Extended Areas of Knowledge for State Repression

Area	Extension of knowledge
A# 1	State Repression is an experience of a rival system between the regimes and the dissenters.
A# 2	The ongoing differences between the regimes and the dissenters facilitate the environment of foreign interference that determines the investment of support based on mutual interests.
A# 3	The size of each of the conflicting parties will serve to promote the existing practices of state repression to state terrorism.
A# 4	State repression of Syria is inherited legacy from father to son because of the social norms and the family connection.
A# 5	the Syrians' perspectives in the U.S. diaspora can be considered a way for broader context to explore how other diasporic Syrians elsewhere in the world have perceived the state repression of the son, Bashar regime.

First, the rival system between the regimes and their dissenters drives the experience of state repression. Second, the ongoing differences between the regimes and the dissenters facilitate the environment of interference of foreign actors that determine the investment of support based on mutual interests. Third, the size of each of the conflicting parties (regimes, dissenters, foreign actors) will serve to promote the existing practices of state repression to state terrorism. Fourth, the Syrian state repression generates a unique experience that has been noticed in the inherited rule from father to son where the social norms and the family connection facilitated the environment of continuation of the father's repressive legacy. However, the Syrian state repression could have relaxed if the son had replaced the old guards of his father with his generation's youth. Fifth, the Syrians' perspectives in the U.S. diaspora can be considered a way for

broader context to explore how other diasporic Syrians elsewhere in the world have perceived the state repression of the son, Bashar regime.

Levels of Interpretation of Explored Findings

The theoretical framework for this study was the System Theoretical Framework (STF). I developed this model of a framework based on the components of the General Systems Theory of Bertalanffy (1954) and its modification by Bronfenbrenner (1981), and Patton and McMahon (2015). My developed (STF) model consists of three levels of analysis: (a) the individual system level, (b) the societal system level, and (c) the external system level. While the individual level focuses on the individual socialization and leadership style, the societal level focuses on the Syrian society's domestic actors. The external level focuses on foreign actors who support the Syrian regime.

The explored findings reflect the Syrians' perceptions in the U.S. diaspora on the reasons and the conditions that empowered the practices of the Assad regime of state repression. Each system level of analysis will be used to analyze specific findings. The analysis is explained as the following (See Table 11).

Table 11

The Theoretical Analysis of the Explored Findings

Level of Analysis	Explored Findings	Utilized Theories
The Individual System Level	1. National support and domestic loyalty through investment in economic and political privileges. 2. Policing public loyalty to prevent popular demands.	• Symbolic interaction theory • Path-goal and expectancy leadership
The Societal System Level	3. The regime fully employed the national resources to be tools for state terrorism implementation. 4. State repression was a legacy of the continuation of the system of rivalry between the regime and the dissents. 5. The necessity of the regime to prevent the national disintegration of Syria because of the ethnic and ideological differences. 6. Regime change is a widespread desire because of the ongoing public aggregation.	• The organizational theory of power (OTP) • The resource mobilization theory (RMT)
The External System Level	7. The continuation of the external support empowered the regime's survival and the practices of state repression.	• Realism

Interpretation at the Individual System Level

By following the levels of the STF in order, the individual level focuses on the

socialized personality and the leadership style of the son, Bashar Assad. Finding 1 and 2

will be analyzed in this system level. While finding 1 is interpreted analytically based on

first Mead (1934) symbolic interaction theory, finding 2 is interpreted based on

Northouse (2016) leadership path-goal and expectancy theories.

Finding 1: National Support and Domestic Loyalty Through Investment in Economic and Political Privileges

Bashar's personality is shaped by the experience of his family, his Alawite tribe, and the advocates of his father. His tribe struggled to capture power, maintain the legacy of the Alawite minority in government, and resist any challenges that might jeopardize the future of the family and the Alawite tribe (Perthes, 2004). This experience formed the social personality for Bashar to be considered the individual who continues to maintain the father's legacy and the benefits of the beneficiaries. Since the father awarded his supporters both economic and political privileges, the son traditionally needed to continue the father style. Winning national support will serve the interest of the regime on one hand and protect the privileges of the fellow supporters on the other hand. The fears and the interests of the regime created the socialized interaction between the regime and the fellow supporters.

Finding #2: Policing Public Loyalty to Prevent Popular Demands

The leadership path-goal and expectancy theories also offer another interesting interpretation of this finding. The two theories focus on motivation and reward (Northouse, 2016). Bashar successfully encouraged the various security agencies' members to follow his father's loyalty and discipline (Perthes, 2004). Regime followers and the various national security agencies were highly motivated to demonstrate their support to Bashar since there were rewarded economic benefits and given political privileges. It became the national security agencies' primary mission that policing public loyalty will prevent future challenges for the Bashar regime.

Interpretation at the Societal System level

This level of STF contains the interaction of the Syrians social groups within the government and society. Two theories support the societal level of analysis. The first one is Mintzberg's (1983) organizational theory of power (OTP), which relies on the notion that the organization's power is controlled by a group of influencers who dominate the resources and enjoy the monopoly of the decision making. The second one is Tilly's (1978) resource mobilization theory (RMT) that relies on four factors: (a) interests, (b) organization, (c) mobilization, and (d) opportunity.

Finding #3-#6 will be analyzed under this system-level. Finding #3 is that the regime fully employed the national resources to be tools for state terrorism implementation, finding #4 is that state repression was a legacy of continuation of the system of rivalry between the regime and the dissents, finding #5 is that the necessity of the regime to prevent the national disintegration of Syria because of the ethnic and ideological differences, and finding #6 is that regime change is a widespread desire because of the ongoing public aggregation. All of them are confirmed analytically in this level through Mintzberg (1983) and Tilly (1978) explanation. The explanation goes as the following:

Finding 3: Regime Fully Employed the National Resources to be Tools for State Terrorism Implementation

By analyzing how Bashar regime employed the national resources to be the tools of state terrorism, the OTP suggests that all the bureaucratic agencies and the military forces of the Syrian state are administratively controlled by a group of influencers who

are holding powerful positions inside the Baath Party, manage the various resources of their organizations, are not an oversight by any legislative entities, enjoy the monopoly of decision making and implement them repressively to protect the regime and quell the dissent groups (Pierret, 2020; Ristani, 2020). Because of these characteristics, all the bureaucratic agencies became the terrorist tools for state repression. The RMT, on the other hand, does not deny the analysis of the organizational power of the various national agencies; instead, it supports the analysis by considering the four factors (interest, organization, mobilization, and opportunity) as a way to explain the foundation, the behavior, the goal, and the mission of each group. For example, the Alawite tribe's interest is to remain in power; the Baath Party, since it is a single dominant party, is the organization to reach power. Since the party in power, it offers members the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of national resources, the military, and the state (De Juan & Bank, 2014; Dukhan, 2019). Because of the party affiliation, members and their working agencies are fully employed to act repressively when the regime is challenged by the dissenters (Miller, 2019).

Finding 4: State Repression was a Legacy of the Continuation of the System of Rivalry Between the Regime and the Dissents

This finding can also be analyzed by the Mintzberg (1983) OTP and the Tilly (1978) RMT. The reason state repression is a rival system in Syria between the regime and the dissents goes back to the father reign, Hafez Assad (1970-2000). The father forcefully captured power and ousted his rival in party and government, which created a legacy of unsolved differences between the regime and dissents (Roberts, 2015;

Sorenson, 2014). According to the OTP, the dissent groups are dominated by a small

number of influencers who lived abroad, formed a coalition of groups against the regime,

received support from other nations hostile to Syria like Turkey and the U.S., and

monopolized the decision making of the coalition on behalf of the Syrian People.

Therefore, they became a security threat to the Bashar regime (Dukhan, 2019; Roberts,

2015). Similarly, the RMT confirms this explanation by suggesting that the various

dissent groups interest is to drive the Baath Party from power; therefore, creating a

coalition group abroad will be the organization to mobilize the Syrians against Bashar

regime and to gain international attention to support the cause of the dissent groups

(Roberts, 2015). For them, the opportunity to create changes in Syria was transforming

power from father to son and the bloody events of the Arab spring in 2011.

Finding 5: Necessity of the Regime to Prevent the National Disintegration of Syria

Because of the Ethnic and Ideological Differences

The Syrian nation is sociologically characterized as a multicultural society in

terms of ethnic and religious backgrounds (Dukhan, 2019; Pierret, 2020; Roberts, 2015;

Sorenson, 2014). The political power is dominated by the Shia communities, mostly

members of the Alawite tribe, and make the most prominent minority of such ideological

beliefs (Volk, 2015). Other minorities of ethnic groups, divided into various tribes, are

also loyal to the regime since they fear that the majority of Arab Sunni might

discriminate and suppress them if the Assad regime loses power (Dukhan, 2019). From

this perspective, both OTP and RMT offer an obvious explanation. Based on OTP, the

tribal assemblies are formed because of the interest of recognition and discrimination

fears. They are controlled by the leaders of each tribe who also local leaders in the Baath Party in their region; therefore, they are the influencers who generate loyalty to the regime and enjoy the monopoly of decision making. Because of this loyalty, tribal leaders' followers are rewarded by the regime's political positions in various government agencies (Dukhan, 2019; Sorenson, 2014). As a result of that, tribal leaders' followers pledged support to the regime.

The RMT, on the other hand, explain ethnic tribal loyalty and ideological affiliation similar to the OTP. The four factors of RMT (interest, organization, mobilization, and opportunity) are observed in the ethnic tribal assemblies' behavior. They share the same interest in recognition and fear of discrimination. They joined the Baath Party since it is their organization to achieve their aspirations (Sorenson, 2014). Their leaders mobilized their followers to rally behind the regime, and their interaction with the government generated the resources to protect them from discrimination (Miller, 2019; Perthes, 2004). Something they would not enjoy it if the power controlled by the Sunni majority.

Finding 6: Regime Change is a Widespread Desire Because of the Ongoing Public Aggregation

It is the last finding at the analysis of the societal level. Both OTP and RMT offer a similar explanation. The Syrian descent groups are organized initially to drive the Baath Party and its agents from power. They formed an abroad coalition and selected their representatives to act on behalf of the Syrians at home and abroad (Cengiz, 2020; Hinnebusch, 2020). They mobilized various resources and implemented them against the

father first and the son regime second. They utilized the legacy of the father state

repression as an opportunity for domestic protesting and took advantage of Arab spring to

impose more political demands on the son regime. Remarkably, their interest became

regime change. Their organization is the formation of the coalition. Their mobilization is

both the domestic advocates and international support, and their opportunity is the misery

of the Syrian people (Hinnebusch, 2020).

Interpretation at the External System Level

This level of STF contains the interaction of the Syrian regime with regional and

global politics, more particularly the regime interaction with both Russia and Iran. The

utilized theory in this respect is theory of realism in global politics. Therefore, finding # 7

will be interpreted based on theory of realism.

Finding 7: Continuation of the External Support Empowered the Regime's Survival

and State Repression Practices

Bashar regime's external support comes from both Russia and Iran (Goodarzi,

2020). The association between the three regimes is characterized by the principles of the

realist theory of international politics. The realist approach's primary focus is the nation-

state's national interests (Morgenthau, 1945; Nye Jr., 2002; Yenigun, 2016). Since the

early decades of the Cold War, Syria has been a client and ally for the Soviet Union

(Vorobyeva, 2020). It became a better ally when the Assad father captured power in 1970

(Freedman, 2018). It remains an ally in post-cold since both nations kept sharing a

common hostility to western democracies, particularly the U.S. (Perra, 2016;

Unnikrishnan & Purushothaman, 2017). Obviously, for Moscow, the Assad regime is the

needed agent to balance out the American influence in the Middle East; therefore, the Syrian dissenters are the West's agents. Supporting Assad in his war on the dissenters is the only way to maintain Syria within the Russian influence.

The explanation of the Iranian support does not make much of a difference from the Russian support. Syria became a powerful ally for Iran due to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Goodarzi, 2020). The two regimes share the same ideological belief of the Shia doctrine. Both share political hostility to the U.S. and Israel. The western embargo and the U.S. containment for Iran pushed the Tehran regime to strengthen its ally with Damascus (Hetou, 2019; Tan & Perudin, 2019). Therefore, for Tehran, the Assad regime must be supported to quell the Syrian dissenters backed by the West (Koizumi, 2019). Having Assad out of power means turning Syria an ally to the U.S., who will, in return, implement Damascus as a tool to keep containing and weakening Iran and its extreme ideological values. Unsurprisingly, Moscow's mutual interests and Tehran worked to the advantage of the Bashar regime to survive the Arab spring, quell the dissenters, and partner with Russia and Iran with war crimes against the protesters (Pierret, 2020). Such collaboration made the Syrian state repression a new form of state terrorism. Because of their cooperation, it can be described as "authoritarian compassionates."

The three levels suggest useful tools to interpret the findings to connect the STF with the study findings. Each finding is associated with a certain level. Each level offers a theoretical explanation for each finding. The perceptions of the Syrian state repression resulted from the participants' experiences and observations for the interaction between

the regime's individual socialized personality, the organized social groups of the Syrian society, and the foreign influences of the regime's external support.

Limitations of the Study

At the beginning of writing my dissertation, I expected two limitations. The first one was the technicality of participants recruiting since this limitation was associated with safety and fears. The second limitation was the geography of this study since I relied on the Syrian sample in the U.S. However, while present during the study, these two limitations were minimized. I successfully recruited 15 participants because I sent several invitations via emails and other social media forms. Also, I called some participants, and I asked them to keep following up with potential participants who they had recommended to me. Since the participation was voluntary, I could not ethically pursue any methods of enticing. Nevertheless, I was deeply interested in learning about their reason for not replying. The only answers I reached either the lack of interests or the jeopardy of their safety. The latter was a challenge not the former, although I stated a full commitment for their safety and privacy protection.

The geographical environment of this study was the second limitation. The study focused on Syrians in the U.S. Still, it was challenging to expand the geography to the Syrians in Canada or those who travel between the U.S. and other Middle Eastern nations or to reach other Syrians who kept traveling within the U.S. Despite that, I successfully recruited a participant traveling to one of the refugee camps in Turkey. That participant could not recommend any participant who shares the same interest in traveling and visiting refugee' camps.

Three additional limitations to my study emerged while I was conducting research. The third limitation that I experienced during the study was the nature of the sampling to identify the participants' sociological backgrounds. All the participants had a good quality of educational background, holding good professional status in the U.S., and they were between ages 25 and 60. More importantly, I could not ask about their sectarian background, religious affiliation, and political orientation or look for participants who were teenagers or early 20s. I realized having a sample contains a diversity of age and sociological backgrounds could lead to more significant findings since the Syrian society is multiethnic and multireligious.

The fourth limitation that I experienced during the study was the level of the participants' experiences. My participants were not refugees, nor they were asylum seekers. Although some of them lost family members in the civil war in Syria, I felt it was not enough to generate data. I intended from the beginning to recruit those who were victims of the regime and became active members of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). It was a hard step since the SNC was in Turkey. For security reasons, it was hard to search for its members in the U.S. However, after attempting to reach these members, I was advised by some participants that the SNC had become a corrupt and puppet organization for its foreign supporters.

My final limitation was a methodological one because of COVID-19. This global epidemic forced society to shift more into technology use and prevent face-to-face interviewing and socializing. Although I benefitted by saving on budget efforts to reach participants face to face, and I found virtual interviewing to be a fast track to conduct

interviews via technological means (emails, phones, zoom, messenger recording), face-to-face interviews create physical orientation to look for body language and provide a better opportunity for understanding, following up, and analyzing the responses of the interviewees. Culturally, the standard norms for Middle Eastern contact suggest that face-to-face socialization could generate a greater comfortability, faithful friendship, harmony, and positively influence data collection methods.

Recommendations for Further Research

Since the purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of the diasporic Syrians in the U.S. about the conditions and the reasons they think empowered the practices of state repression of the Assad regime, the following are my recommendations for further needed exploration.

My first recommendation is that perceptions should be taken to a broader context to include and compare other Syrians' perceptions who live elsewhere in democratic nations. The living experience can generate further details on how different democracies have shaped their thoughts about their country's autocratic regime.

My second recommendation is to research foreign support for the dissenters and how much the support could influence the state repression's effectiveness. Neither the reviewed literature nor this study focused on how other outsiders' support for dissenters can affect the regime's relationship and dissent. One approach for this recommendation could be associated with the role of the U.S. in supporting the dissenters against the Syrian regime and how much this support impacted the level of repression.

Third, the living experience of the Syrians in the diaspora of nondemocratic nations also is recommended for research. This study found that the Syrian's living experience in the U.S. diaspora positively influenced their thought about the U.S. democratic values and practices. Some of the participants indicated that if there were part of the American democracy in Syria, the nation would be a champion in human rights and political stability. It is crucial to learn whether the Syrian residents in nondemocratic nations think about democracy to stabilize or think about regime change as a way of political stability.

Fourth, I recommend research into the roots of state repression. Neither my research study nor the reviewed literature investigated whether state repression is culturally created or politically founded and how this contributes to state repression practices. Researchers argue that autocratic regimes implement state repression to survive and protect their interests (Bak et al., 2019; Davenport, 2007; Hendrix & Salehyan, 2019; Ritter & Conard, 2016; Ryckman, 2019). However, there is no explanation for the cultural factors that generate the environment of state repression.

My fifth recommendation is to frame state repression as state terrorism because it contains political violence. State repression should be considered another form of state terrorism. Social scientists who studied terrorism refer state terrorism only to those nations who support foreign terrorist organizations (Dekmejian, 2007; Martin, 2017; White, 2014; Wight, 2015). Since state terrorism is motivated by political ends, state repression is a combination of systematic violent methods to advance political ends. In my previous research, I explored that terrorism is divided into individuals, groups, and

states (Salhi, 2013). While the individual terror is described as an anarchist, assassin, and

lone wolf, the group terror is ideological, ethnic, and religious (Dekmejian, 2007; Nacos,

2016; Salhi, 2013). More importantly, state terror contains regime support for foreign

terrorist organizations and a regime adoption of coercive and bloody methods to terrorize

the public and terminate their demands (See Figure 12).

Figure 12

Classification of Terrorism
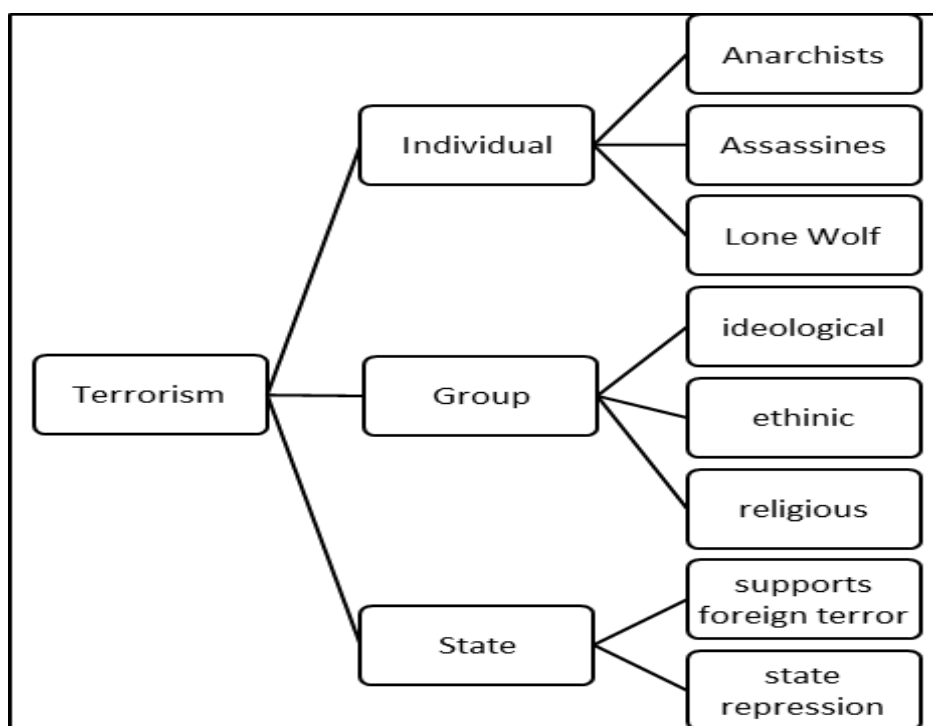
Implications for Positive Social Change

Studying any form of violence has never been an easy task since it requires a

deep understanding of each side of the violence (Demmers, 2012). I argue that state

repression is a violent instrument to let one party wins and the other party vanishes. As a

social researcher in violence, terror, and government, I have concluded that no form of violence can stop unless there is a change in its course. Idealistically, social change is the mission to challenge the status quo and change it positively for humanitarian reasons. This study contains several suggestions for positive social change.

The first suggestion is generated from the participants' living experience in the U.S. Several participants indicated to me their deep appreciation for the democratic system in the U.S. American democracy has been demonstrated as a journey of the struggle for liberty, equality, equity, and recognition. Syrian Americans must learn from this experience by interacting deeply with all forms of civic engagement. Therefore, civic engagement is a mission to resist state repression. One way to implement this mission is to utilize technology, more particularly the forms of social media. Syrian Americans need to broadcast for their people in Syria political participation, like voting, elections, interest group lobbying, government accountability, the rule of law, and civil liberties. Syrians back home will deny the regime's enticement for political loyalty by broadcasting these values and practices. One of the participants showed me the posted media clips inspired the Syrian protesters for more demands. Another participant stated to me that social media would continue the revolution to the end.

The second suggestion for positive social change is that the diasporic Syrians of the U.S. need to expand their network of collaboration with a higher level of policymakers in the U.S. During the data collection, I explored that the Syrian American Council has been an active force to reach Congressmen for immigration issues and other humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees. This collaboration needs to expand the plan to

include political demands. The U.S. Congress has various tools to influence American foreign policy (Hastedt, 2018). To take this into action, Syrians need to learn how to lobby and push Congress to sanction the Assad regime's supporters because it violates human rights and crashes on democratic demands. Human rights and the calls of democracy are the idealist values that shape the vision of American democracy (Hastedt, 2018).

The third suggestion for positive social change is the Syrian Americans must invest in their constitutional rights. Both the First Amendment and the Fourteenth Amendment ensure the rights of liberal individualism and the prevention of discrimination. During the interviews, I was amazed by the number of Syrian organizations for humanitarian needs. From this perspective, there is an excellent opportunity for the Syrians in the U.S. to expand their civil organizations to political assemblies and to form alliances across the globe with other advocates for human rights and democracy. Such a move will generate international attention with a message to the Syrian regime that Syria's current turmoil is no longer a local issue; instead, it has become a globalized issue for better Syria.

The final suggestion for positive social change is a shift in belief from regime change to regime reforms. One participant indicated that the best way to ensure stability in Syria was the creation of transnational collaboration for settlement and dialogue. Such an attempt should aim to create democratic pluralism where an equal opportunity to prevent all forms of discrimination, popular sovereignty to ensure governmental accountability, coexistence for the ideological rivalry, and conditional amnesty for the

regime as long as there is a peaceful transformation for power (Lijphart, 2012; Wiarda, 2003).

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the perception of the Syrians in the U.S. diaspora about the reasons and the conditions that empowered Assad regime practices of state repression. The study adopted the qualitative research methods to collect and analyze the needed data for such exploration. To explore the perceptions, the study used the STF model. The model contains three system levels of analysis the individual, the societal, and the external. The interaction between them led to a better understanding of the conditions and the reasons that contributed to the Assad regime practices of state repression.

After the explored findings were interpretably analyzed based on the STF, they indicated the conditions and the reasons that contributed to Assad regime practices were a combination of forces of interaction between the individual system, the societal system, and the external system. The outcome of interaction generated the notion that state repression was a rival system characterized by bloody forces of violence.

The study also recommended taking the explored perception into a broader context and investigating the living experience of other diasporic Syrians in democracies and nondemocracies and how this shaped their thoughts on their regimes. More importantly, the explored findings of the Syrian perceptions played a substantial role in recommending positive social change for a better Syria. The most important take-home message was that state repression could be significantly minimized as long as there is a

dialogue between the rival parties to pursue compromises for their differences; otherwise, it will draw external intervention that will generate the group of authoritarian compassionates.

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47

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Appendix: Survey

Hello, my name is Ribhi Salhi, a doctorate student at Walden University. Please allow me to have one hour from your time. Thank you for taking the time and speaking with me. As I have explained before and signed the informed consent, your participation is fully voluntary, and you may stop any time. Please do not feel obligated that you will need to answer my questions.

Let's begin please by saying something about your educational background, years of living in the U.S., and your social life.

Major Questions:

1. What is your perception about what is going on in Syria in terms of political turmoil?

2. Can you share any personal or professional experience that you had with Assad regime?

3. Why does the current regime in Syria still enjoy some sort of popular support?

    a. What do you think about those people who are still loyal to the Asaad regime?

    b. As we know, the tribal system of Syria is politicized and recently has become sharply divided. Can you tell me more about that?

4. To the best of your knowledge, how would you explain the meaning of state repression?

5. What is your thought about the foreign support for the regime, like Iran and Russia, for example?

6. What will be a good way to create a potential national settlement between the regime and the national opposition group?

   a. With the current conditions of Syria, what is the best way to create national stability?

   b. I am interested in learning more about SNC. What should the SNC do to help the Syrian people?

7. We live in the U.S. I would like to know how your living experience in the U.S. has shaped your thought about the Assad regime?

   a. Can you tell whether the Syrian Americans are helping the Syrian victims of the regime?

I highly appreciate your input. Is there is anything else you would like to add?

Would you like me to send a copy of the transcript?

Thank you so much. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

So Long!!!