

Constructing state, territory, and sovereignty in the Syrian conflict

Politics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Mustafa Menshawy**

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Abstract

The article argues that sovereignty claims and counterclaims are still very much at work in international and civil conflicts involving state actors. Focusing on the case of the Syrian conflict, the article engages in methodological triangulation using Critical Discourse Analysis and international relations theories. It finds that the *sovereignty-first* narrative adopted by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, and its external allies such as Russia, has built an 'effective' discourse that has been adopted in a coherent, consistent, and resonant manner, as well as a 'credible' discourse which combined words with actions (i.e. *performatives* and *constatives* of sovereignty). The effectiveness and credibility of the *sovereignty-first* narrative is also judged by the absence of effective and credible contending narratives demonstrated by the tepid application of concepts like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) by the United States and its European allies. In making these comparisons, the Syrian conflict can be contextualised by relating it to the Arab Spring and geopolitical shifts in international affairs. It is within this contextualisation that the article demonstrates broader claims about the endurance of the 'territorial state' in the Middle East.

Keywords

discourse, globalisation, Russia, sovereignty, Syria, United States, Westphalia

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Introduction

Sovereignty remains an 'elusive and controversial' notion shaping world politics and political thought (Pusterla, 2016). Despite centuries of analysis, it remains contested, with disputed origins and an enigmatic position of privilege. Even 'sceptical' scholars who are dissatisfied with the concept continue to reproduce the logic of sovereignty in their thinking (Havercroft, 2011). One main reason for this elusiveness and controversy is found in the gap between theory and practice. While sovereignty can acquire a contextual specificity and variegated accoutrements in practice (Krasner, 1999), it

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remains hostage to monolithic encasements seeking its standardisation and generalisability. Within these encasements, certain features of sovereignty are included and others are excluded. For example, some scholars declared the death of 'Westphalian' features in their adoption of a globalised definition undermining elements of territorialisation and state actorhood (Croxtton, 1999: 569–591 see also Rothe Mullins, 2010: 361–440). Trends in politics and international relations have even celebrated this inclusion/exclusion by accommodating and assimilating appealing catchphrases such as 'the world is beyond Westphalia' while overstating the importance of emerging values like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (Lyons and Mastanduno, 1995). Nevertheless, these developments failed to resolve the 'dilemma of sovereignty' as the practice side kept moving in one direction and the theory side kept moving in the other, producing 'hypocritical' manifestations and double-standards by both practitioners and theoreticians.

The article is an attempt to bring theory and practice closer by using this controversy and elusiveness as an *asset*, rather than a *liability*, of the 'sovereignty problematic'. It contributes to trends in the literature that analyse sovereignty as a doctrine and an activity (Thomson, 1995: 219), as plural and divisible (Sheehan, 2006: 2), and as a 'chunk' and a 'basket' (Perez, 1996: 467). This mutually inclusive analysis can explore claims and counterclaims based on articulations of sovereignty's ambiguity as well as trace the levels of operationalisation of the concept itself. The research adopts two pivots acting as a framework for the analysis of sovereignty's articulation and operationalisation: effectiveness and credibility.

Effectiveness, widely conceptualised by John Agnew (2009), can disassociate the concept from long-entrenched binaries that have occupied a large part of the international relations literature such as state and territory, inside and outside, and internal and external. It allows sovereignty to be a practice that is 'shared', 'pooled', and 'contested' across 'space-spanning' networks which can be exercised non-territorially even within the territorial boundaries of a state (Agnew, 2009: 113). Demarcation through borders, the essence of state territoriality, relies no longer on the 'boundaries of domination' and tools of coercion to keep, or even violate, this demarcation (Agnew, 2009: 113). Sovereignty, as such, can be 'neither sustained nor undermined' without the 'active collaboration by collective actors on both sides of borders' (Agnew, 2009: 116). It is within the availability of 'authoritative power networks' and their circulation rather than a single centralised site, such as the 'state', that *de facto* sovereignty can be maintained (Agnew, 2009: 7). This article adopts the criteria of effectiveness to understand how state actors involved in the Syrian crisis can individually or collectively place, replace, and displace specific 'regimes of sovereignty' for the sake of serving their own self-interest.

Agnew's effectiveness still requires credibility. Actors involved in the process need to enforce their own 'version' of sovereignty, not just by material resources related to physical coercion but also through 'communicative' channels related to 'persuasion', especially as their powers are not centralised but 'diffused' within patterns of 'association and interaction' (Agnew, 2009: 116). Within this circulation of coercion and persuasion, sovereignty can mean everything and anything '*until proven otherwise*' (Pusterla, 2016: 2). Therefore, sovereignty is in need of a 'credible promise of a normative statement' obtained by 'endlessly postponing the empirical test bench to the future, or by retroactively neutralising past bounds' (Pusterla, 2016: 3). Having said that, sovereignty needs actors to 'hide the diachronic gap within claims of sovereignty' and to operationalise their claims by coordinating both the *performatives* and *constatives* of sovereignty (Pusterla, 2016: 3). Eva Bellin (2004: 143) made a similar argument on the robustness of authoritarianism in

Syria and the wider Middle East: state leaders can present a valid and well-articulated discourse on their legitimacy while maintaining a 'coherent and effective' monopoly on the means of coercion to add 'value' to this discourse.

The article traces effectiveness and credibility through analysing language and beyond – that is, sovereignty is not mere words but also practices 'that systematically form the objects of which we speak' (Foucault, 1972: 49). For example, the territorial state is not treated as a 'disinterested statement about an objective order of political space' but a 'discursive configuration which assists in the production of this order' (Foucault, 1972: 47). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has many perspectives, but I adopt Norman Fairclough's (1992) approach since it analyses both *linguistic* and the *extra-linguistic* domains. Linguistic patterns are identified in the speeches and interviews of leaders and officials of the states involved in the conflict. The themes are sampled as frames including words, phrases, or sentences helping us to understand what Erving Goffman (1974: 11–12) calls 'principles of organisation' of discursive events and, more significantly, actors' involvement in them. Once identified in purposefully sampled texts of those state actors, these frames are then grouped and ordered/hierarchised into 'themes' on basis of their salience evidenced by consistency (judged by repetition, frequency, and resonance with other narratives formulated within particular geographic and temporal settings) and coherence (judged by coordination in practices and relations dictating such a unified narrative). The linguistic patterning is not formalist (i.e. lexical, grammatical or semantic) per se, but functional, that is, the main interest is 'what language can do' and what language users 'can do with it' (Halliday, 2004). The second level of analysis, the *extra-linguistic*, seeks an understanding of the context in which the construction and adoption of these frames/themes evolve into shared meanings and fixed signification within another process which can be called the 'production of meanings' (Steinberg, 1998: 851–852). The *extra-linguistic* elements include the impact of the Arab Spring, the role of diplomacy, and the variance in how the same state actors shift their discourse on sovereignty to match with their interests in other conflicts such as Crimea. As sovereignty itself is taken as a mythical construct that is invented rather than an entity grounded in the 'real world' (McCoy, 2008), this analysis tracing the construction and reconstruction of sovereignty as a discourse obtains further significance. To problematise my argument, as the state in the Middle East has been long publicised as an 'artificial' territory with 'fabricated' borders (Fromkin, 2009), the discursive manipulation of 'sovereignty', based on the constructed meanings of territory and borders in the Syrian conflict, can also take shape.

Assad and the Russians: Prioritising the 'territorial state'

Assad has focused on all attributes of 'Westphalian sovereignty', particularly territory – this focus is congruent with sovereignty since early modern European history when 'sovereign rulers and dynasties were preoccupied with territory' (Jackson, 2007: 104). This type of sovereignty is also about the establishment of boundaries which measure 'how far a sovereign's power extends, and also, by definition, where it stops' (Sheehan, 2006: 3). In one interview, Assad stated that the main goal is for the state to 'take control of every part of its territory' and promised that the fight will continue 'until we capture the whole country', Syria 'gains its independence', and 'every part' of its territory 'gets liberated' (Youtube, 2016d). It is this task in which Assad seeks to establish legitimacy for his rule by restoring the conventional principle of 'peculiar unity, compactness and coherence' which a state should have to obtain what John Herz (1976: 100–101) calls 'permeability' or 'impenetrability'.

Restoring territory can even justify Assad's use of violence both against internal and external 'enemies'. In Max Weber's words, it is about regaining the 'legitimate' and 'monopolised' use of force which a state should wield (Weber, 1946). That said, state territory itself, in Henri Lefebvre's (1991: 280) words, becomes a 'space established and constituted by violence'. Defending himself against criticisms for the indiscriminate use of violence, Assad said in one speech, there is a 'territory that has to be restored' (Presidentassad.net, 2015). Even more, the insistence in Assad's narrative can subsume all other elements of the 'national territorial totality' such as people (Halliday, 1987: 2017). The legitimacy of the ruler resides in the power as the protector of this bounded territorial delimitation and not necessarily in the power as a protector of people. In other words, the contours of each power can move smoothly and independently from other 'powers' (e.g. Agnew, 2009: 120–121), and sovereignty, as such, can be territory-focused rather than sociological and people-focused (Jackson, 2007: 106).

Assad also historicised his claims on these Westphalian attributes of sovereignty. Syria had been one of those states whose borders were defined by European imperialists rather than the culturally distinct population groupings that were enclosed or divided by them (Jackson, 2007: 107). Leïla Vignal (2017: 812) even argued that the state was 'invented' by the post-First World War settlements. She also attributed to the Baathist party led by Hafez Al-Assad, the father of Bashar and the president of the country since 1971, 'the consolidation of the territorial state' as a priority for decades. This consolidation includes the construction of 'a centralized state, based on administrative, political and security territorial hierarchy' (Vignal, 2017: 812). For Hafez, a fighter against foreign occupation and as a member of the minority Alawite sect whose legitimacy and authority is always questioned by the majority Sunni population, protecting territory acted as a safer justification for holding power for three decades (see also Seale, 1999: 120). Assad, among other Middle East leaders, was thus successful at 'adapting and mixing different interpretations of sovereignty to their own purposes', that is, statehood and sovereignty became 'embedded' in the sense of states appearing 'strong', by defending their borders and warding off internal dissent (Fawcett, 2017: 804).

Assad the son, inadvertently or not, learnt the lesson from his father by employing the same long-standing 'authoritarian contract' based on the conventional marriage between a ruler's legitimacy and the projected protection of territory. Before the conflict which began in 2011, this territory and its bordered delimitations worked as a 'spatial envelope' in which the legitimacy of Assad regime operated (Vignal, 2017: 818). After the conflict, this envelope, to go with the metaphor, included competing legitimacies of non-state actors that turned Syria into a 'mosaic of territories' controlled by each one of them (Vignal, 2017: 818). Therefore, the rhetoric of Assad asserted his preoccupation to restore this spatial continuity and, by consequence, the legitimacy of his rule which was based on it. Assad told an interviewer, 'I hope that history will see me as the man who protected his country ... from the intervention, and saved its sovereignty' (NBC News, 2016). In his speeches and interviews, he emphasised, 'It is not enough for me to rule half the country', 'the homeland, Syria, is our right, the protection of Syria is our duty' (Youtube, 2016d). Assad even evoked imagery of the struggle for independence from the occupying forces in the 20th century: 'The colonialist West is still colonialist; the means may change, but its essence is still the same' (SANA, 2015). Here, Assad plays another old game paradoxically related to the role of colonisers in sovereignty-making in Syria and the wider Middle East. Colonisation provided the starting point by introducing the bounded territorial delimitation of the state in which people, within the state's boundaries, were subject to its sovereign control

(Zartman, 2017: 938). It was the coloniser who consolidated control of these states in the name of territorial sovereignty (Jackson, 1993; Kreijen, 2004: 3, 34, 40). The end result is 'proto-states' endowed with borders and a state-like apparatus but deprived of sovereignty by the coloniser who held it (Zartman, 2017: 938).

By evoking the image of the 'coloniser' and the outside, Assad is also 'externalising' sovereignty and re-prioritising its elements within these binaries of the inside/outside or the internal/external. In this sense, the 'internal' sovereignty governed and circumscribed by the framework of laws and institutions has to give way to 'external sovereignty' represented by the mission to drive those colonisers or 'aliens' from the territory which is also a feature 'inherent in sovereignty and essential for any political community' (Carens, 1995: 229). Assad's re-prioritising of sovereignty can be judged as effective even at the broader historically comparative level. The legal and political discourse in the post-Civil War United States came to 'emphasize and defend the overriding prerogative' of union and national government' at the expense of human rights since, if 'law flows from sovereignty; law becomes possible by the pre-existence of sovereignty' (cited in Sassen, 2006: 129). To put it simply, Assad defends the need to restore the territorial state and borders once imposed by the coloniser by accusing the same coloniser of seeking to destabilise them.

Since it is all about Syria's 'sovereign identity', Assad also builds his claims on nationalism and pan-Arabism. He stated that outsiders want to 'to destroy our unique patriotism and sovereignty, our Arab identity' (SANA, 2015). What the Syrian president does can be described as an attempt 'to fix a point of identity – a universality in space and time against which all differences in space and time can be measured, judged and put in their place' (Walker, 1990: 175). Assad used linguistic formats to fit in within these dichotomisation on sovereignty such as '*us* against *them*'; the same repertoire once pervaded the era of colonialism. He also always juxtaposed his use of first-person plural – *we, us, ourselves* – as mentioned above, with his use of first-person singular – *I, myself* – to not only reconcile contradictory subject positions, roles, and perspectives in the conflict but also to create a 'shared responsibility' imposed on the recipients of the text to act together to protect Syria's territory. These linguistic forms help rulers such as Assad to 'buttress older forms of legitimation ... on which they have hoped to base new versions of these means by which power is converted into authority' (Hinsley, 1986: 25). Assad acts like the weak rulers in post-feudal European history who once employed the same 'territorial exclusivity' as a discourse to gain control over a highly fragmented territory that was to become France (Sassen, 2006: 44).

On basis of 'externalising' sovereignty as such, Assad also reiterated the Westphalian principle of equality among states: 'They are a sovereign country. They are an independent country. This is their limit. They do not have to interfere in another country' (Russia Today, 2016a). By fighting for objects such as territory, and values such as no interference, Assad could also manage to *de-personalise* and *objectivise* the conflict, especially as some of his opponents attempted otherwise by calling for his resignation as a step towards ending it. These are random citations from two separate interviews with Assad: 'It is not about me. It is about Syria' (Youtube, 2016d), 'it is not about me ... it is about Syria' (NBC News, 2016). This subjective sense of solidarity is thus based on objective demands such as territorial integrity or state independence which Assad shares with other members of 'community of sentiments' in the name of Syrian people. Sovereignty had long accommodated these private/public, subjective/objective binaries inherent in its representations. Even before Westphalia, sovereignty was judged by how far sovereigns controlled property, or what the Romans called the *dominium*, an idea which sovereigns transferred from private to public

sphere later on (Kratochwil, 1986). Territoriality therefore can act as the ‘functional equivalent of property rights’ (Gilpin, 1981: 15). These rights can be easily denied to others seeking to control the territory which is a scarce property. In his speeches and interviews, Assad always describes opposition groups as ‘usurpers’.

Losing large swathes of territory to opposition forces in the first 3 years of the conflict has turned Assad’s sovereignty claims into a hollow victory. He thus lost his authority over ‘the organisation of space’, an organisation which ultimately serves his legitimacy, as there is ‘no more visible manifestation of this geographic expression of power than the national border’ (Demo, 2005). The fact that Islamic State (ISIS) named itself as a ‘state’ and other opposition groups premised their demands on gaining territory from Syria undermines Assad’s patterned framing based on his equal claims of authority’ over a territorial entity which functions as the index of sovereignty. Nevertheless, the situation was reversed when the Assad regime began to recapture lost territory with the intervention of Russia which began in September 2015. For example, and despite the massive human losses and material damage after years of fighting in Aleppo, the Assad regime claimed victory and the ‘return of Syrian sovereignty’ after forcing all the opposition forces out in December 2016. Aleppo is ‘liberated’, Assad said in an interview in which he used the word ‘defeat’ literally eight times in 2 minutes (Russia Today, 2016). This added further ‘lexical cohesion’ and built a semantic relationship through synonymy in the shape of words signifying the same meanings and collocation referring to this co-occurrence with other lexical items such as ‘war’, ‘commander’, and ‘battle’ in almost all the speeches and interviews of Assad. These territorial regains similarly bring credibility to Assad’s claims as it once did when European states in the wake of Westphalia characteristically fought to defend or acquire territory and protected each subject’s sovereign exclusive authority to a territorial unit (Anderson, 1996).

Still, a significant part of the effectiveness and credibility of the rhetoric and actions of Assad came from allies. The Syrian president has stressed that the support of states such as Russia and Iran runs in parallel with his Westphalian sovereignty claims since their intervention is based on ‘state consent’. In one interview, Assad argued that the Russian presence does not act as interference since the Russians ‘respect our sovereignty’ (Russia Today, 2016). Consent as such accords with the framing of Syria as a territorially independent state since it allows states to enjoy full sovereignty as they ‘act on behalf of their populations, enter into international agreements, claim exclusive control over their territory and exert monopoly over the use of force within their boundaries’ (Guzman, 2011: 5). This again enhances the legitimacy of Assad since if his state is considered the ‘sole source of the ‘right’ to use violence’ (Weber, 1946: 78), it accordingly has the power to endow other states with this ‘right’.

Russian President Vladimir Putin supported Assad’s crude state–central narrative by adding to his Westphalian sovereignty rhetoric the power of the ‘legal international’. Tracing the interviews and speeches of Putin, there is a repetition and frequency of these frames on territorial integrity, non-interference, and legitimacy of the supreme authority of the Syrian regime as part of preserving the international order. Examples abound. In one interview, Putin stated that Russia is not defending the Assad regime, but ‘it defends the principles and norms of the International Law and the current world order’ (Russia Today, 2013). He reacted in another interview to threats of Western military action against Syria; thus, ‘In line with international law, only the U.N. Security Council can sanction the use of force against a sovereign state’ (Kremlin, 2013). Even when Russia joined the conflict directly with military air strikes against Syrian targets, the narrative of both Assad and Putin gained another advantage. Putin said, ‘The entirety of our actions is in

accordance with the International Law and the UN Charter' (Kremlin, 2016). He referred to the US-led coalitions which 'are acting without the UN resolution or without the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government' (Kremlin, 2016). Still facing criticism, especially with the continued killings and destruction in Syria, Putin has remained adamant: 'We must address all problems we face on basis of International Law' (Youtube, 2015). In these examples, Putin historicised his meanings of sovereignty by defending the whole world order marked by the epochal transition from the Middle Ages, known for its 'criss-crossing jurisdictions' and decentralising dynamics, into the nation-state epoch marked with the formation of centralised and exclusive authority over a given territory (Sassen, 2006: 32; Gilpin, 1981). He also defending the geopolitical transition established in the non-Western world by European imperial powers and in which those inherited borders, faulty as they were in not reflecting variations in each state, became 'sacrosanct' (Jackson, 2007: 107). The Russian president therefore is using a legally validated argument even as he repeated the terminology of the International Law respecting the space of each state 'from which all the other states are excluded' and only one authority has the right to carry out 'coercive acts' (Kelsen, 1945: 210–211).

Diplomacy added coherence and resonance as narratives of diplomats were framed at the same way as those of officials. The Syrian delegate in the United Nations (UN) always warns that the approach of some states in dealing with the crisis was undermining the 'Syrian state's sovereignty'. The Syrian ambassador to the UN, Bashaar al-Jaafari, also said, 'We are speaking the language of the UN: territorial integrity of states, political independence of states, sovereignty of states, equal membership of states ...' (Al-Akhbar, 2015). In February 2016, Russia presented a draft UN Security Council resolution calling for Syria's sovereignty to be respected and for an end to the 'interference into internal affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic' (Nicholas, 2016). When Turkey sent troops to Syria in October 2016, the move was described by Syrian and Russian diplomats as a violation of 'sovereignty' (Press TV, 2016). Other allies joined in constructing the meaning of Syrian sovereignty at the same terms. Hassan Rouhani, the president of Iran which is in alliance with the Assad regime, said in an interview, 'what is important for us is the territorial integrity of Syria be maintained' (YouTube and MSNBC, 2016). Iranian diplomats rejected draft resolutions for 'violating the sovereignty of the Syrian Republic ... and running against the norms and principles of the International Law' (Youtube, 2016c). Chinese diplomats followed suit, rejecting an October 2016 French draft resolution which 'does not reflect the full respect for the sovereignty, independence, unification and territorial integrity of Syria' (Youtube, 2016b).

The United States and its allies: The state re-territorialised

It is within this diffusion mentioned above that sovereignty loses any materiality and become as a 'phenomenological essence' constantly used to 'functionally satisfy transcendental needs' (Pusterla, 2016: 10). However, it is this same logic in which sovereignty can work by counter-evidence, that is, there is need for proof since sovereignty works within a 'hypocritical' logic which can cancel the possibility of finding a rebuttal or a counterargument (Pusterla, 2016: 2). In other words, 'any breach of sovereignty can be re-claimed; as entirely sovereign (Pusterla, 2016: 2)'. Therefore, in the case of the Syrian conflict, the United States and its allies can conceive of their own version of 'sovereignty' in order to counter the rival one presented by Assad and Putin. For example, this can be achieved by applying the R2P, once understood as a viable alternative to Westphalia in the globalised world order.

Upon an equally systematic analysis of the statements of Western leaders and diplomats, I found the narrative lacking effectiveness and credibility. This lack is evidenced by the position on Assad himself. By negotiating with, and even arming non-state actors such as opposition groups, Western states can thus diffuse power away from this centralised territorial state. Nevertheless, by hinging their discourse on Assad himself, those states, intentionally or not, support the same Westphalian understanding of sovereignty which positions the president as the central representative authority in Syria. Even so, the narrative came as fragmented and hesitant. UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said in January 2017 that the West should give up the ‘the mantra that Assad must go’, as it ‘has produced the difficulty we now face’ (Wintour, 2017). This claim came 6 months after Johnson’s statement in July 2016 in which he said the ‘suffering of the Syrian people will not end while Assad remains in power’ (Wintour, 2016). France no longer sees the departure of President Bashar al-Assad as a priority in the Syrian conflict (Reuters, June 2017), while Germany took a different position by arguing that Syria’s eventual future should be one without Assad (Euronews, April, 2017).

Historically, the counter-discourses which can stand against the ‘Westphalian sovereignty’ principle of territoriality and non-intervention depended on doctrines such as the R2P, a global norm and a commitment adopted at the 2005 UN World Summit. Russia has vetoed dozens of draft resolutions on Syria and made the UN Security Council ineffective. Thus, the United States and its allies can be held to account for not presenting the R2P as part of a consistent and coherent counter-discourse to the Assad–Putin discursive alliance detailed above. Obama’s behaviour is a case in point.

Obama raised the R2P in some of his speeches, warning in one of them in August 2014 of military action against Syria after it crossed the ‘red line’ by using chemical weapons. Washington also demanded from the UN Security Council that ‘all governments ... [should] ... have a responsibility to protect their people’ and ‘all nations have a stake in helping them meet that responsibility’ (Youtube, 2013b). Nevertheless, this American consensus did not last long. In December 2016, Obama said his country could not intervene in Syria only on the basis of humanitarian imperatives. He said his state could not send ground troops ‘uninvited’, resonating with the notion of ‘state consent’, and sovereignty as a Westphalian precondition for any action beyond the borders of the state (Associated Press, 2016). The then American president also stated that the interests of the United States as a state come first, before any responsibility to act on a humanitarian basis, a statement indicative of the primacy of the Westphalian realist approach to interstate politics. He said, ‘My ultimate priority has to be what the right thing for America is’. Furthermore, he also justified non-intervention on the basis of what he called ‘realistic’ elements such as power asymmetry in the crisis. He said, ‘you had a military superpower in Russia prepared to do whatever it takes to keep its client state involved and you had an original military power in Iran that saw their vital strategic interests at stake’. The American president even went on to acknowledge the legitimacy of Assad’s regime as it gained more territory, unlike the Syrian opposition which ‘is not cohesive enough to necessarily govern the country’ (Associated Press, 2016). Here, Obama is no different from Assad or Putin by giving priority to the state as ‘a peculiar unity, compactness, and coherence’, or in the words of Herz (1976: 100–101), ‘an expanse of territory encircled for its identification and its defense by a “hard shell” of fortifications’. On the same principle of territorial gain/loss, Obama judged other groups: ‘ISIL loses territory. They can’t deliver anything meaningful to the people whose territory they can control’ (CNN, 2014).

Diplomacy also reflected the same hesitance and fragmentation. US diplomats almost made no mention of the R2P. Once mentioned, then US representative in the UN Samantha

Power shifted ‘responsibility’ from Washington to enforce the doctrine by calling on the Assad regime and its allies to take action and stop the atrocities. Linguistically, in almost all of her speeches, Power adopted a transitivity system, mainly related to the ideational function of language, allowing Assad and his allies to be the actors (subjects) who should take an action, not the objects (goals) exposed to such an action taken by others including the United States. Within this transitive system, Power’s linguistic process is always more mental (sensing) and verbal (saying) unlike the linguistic process of the Russian diplomats which is more material (i.e. about acting, like in their statement: ‘We will never allow a Libyan-style regime change in Syria’ (Press TV, 2015)). Power emotively and rhetorically addressed Assad’s allies in a UN speech as such: ‘you bear responsibility for these atrocities ... Are you truly incapable of shame?’ (Said-Moorhouse, 2016). The speech came after another UN speech in which she also asked the Assad regime and its allies ‘If they have a ‘shred of empathy in them’ to stop the ‘relentless’ assaults and respect the norms of ‘civilized behavior’ (Youtube, 2016e). Even when the United States launched a military strike against a Syrian air base on 6 April 2017 after a nerve gas attack attributed to the Assad regime, the US President Donald Trump was keen to justify the attack not on the basis of the R2P but in the need to safeguard ‘vital national security interest’ of the United States and stand against geopolitical threats such as the refugee crisis which ‘continues to destabilize, threatening the United States and its allies’ (White House, 2017). As members of the Western camp kept presenting ‘confused’ objectives in relation to Syria ‘including humanitarian impulses, conflict resolution, conflict containment, regime change for strategic gain, counter-terrorism, chemical weapons destruction and non-proliferation’ (Spencer et al., 2013: 3), the pro-Assad camp and its claims on sovereignty kept solidarity and even went on the offensive in a similarly consistent and coherent manner. Russian Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed doctrines such as R2P as a ‘mask of more sinister motives’ (Adams, 2015: 14).

The extra-linguistic: Sovereignty contextualised

This section identifies the context or the ‘situation’ in within which the language of sovereignty is ‘embedded’ (Halliday, 1978). Analysing this context is meant to see how the surrounding environment contributes to the general ‘textual’ rhetoric of state actors (Woody, 2015). The first situational element relates to the level of realisability, that is, ‘operationalisation of language’, that is, how language as an *enabling* object puts pressure on its users to take a certain action due to their specific ‘articulation’ of it. As such, the narrative of the US-led alliance has failed to be operationalised because it was simply not realisable (Spencer et al., 2013: 3). One clear example is Obama’s rhetoric in August 2012, when he threatened that his thinking would change on whether to use military force in Syria if al-Assad’s regime or other players on the ground started crossing ‘the red line’ by using chemical weapons. However, he failed to enforce this ‘red line’ threat once evidence was found that the regime was involved in the use of these types of weapons. In other words, Obama articulated a linguistic claim – ‘the red line’ threat – which he could not operationalise or link with actions (Crowley, 2017). The United States even accused its allies such as the United Kingdom of derailing US plans to strike Syria (Sanchez, 2017). Once operationalised, the rhetoric came as fragmented and inconsistent. When Obama authorised air strikes in the wake of the fall of Mosul to ISIS in 2014, he raised the R2P doctrine as ‘many thousands of civilians are faced with the danger of being wiped out’ (Bloomberg, 2014). As more civilians have been already killed in Syria during the preceding years, the reasoning cut off any ‘patterns’ in American behaviour which is not

resonant with the developments in the Syrian conflict. Even with Western calls for Assad to resign, they took 'only small and token practical' steps including sanctions on some government officials and on Syria's military and security establishments (Spyer, 2016: 6). Neither statements by Western leaders 'nor limited sanctions had any major effect' (Spyer, 2016: 6). On military support, the US administration was divided regarding the advisability of a major increase in US support for the rebels (McKelvey, 2015).

On the opposing side, the Russians and the Assad regime operationalised their language in the same consistent and coherent manner identified in their rhetoric. First of all, the two sides delivered on their promises of working towards keeping Syria's 'sovereignty' at the basic level of territoriality. Alexander Yakovenko, Russian ambassador to the United Kingdom, wrote in October 2016 explaining Moscow's efforts to strengthen the Syrian state and therefore any Westphalian sovereignty principles depending on this state-centrism: 'Isis is in retreat, having lost more than 4,600 square miles of territory ... The Syrian army and local militia freed 586 towns and villages from Isis' (Yakovenko, 2016). It is the ability to be the 'unique centre of decision presiding over a coherent 'self'' which gives the state as the one of Assad's Syria its power' against the 'external domain of difference and change (Ashley: 1984: 230). Furthermore, the Russians also offered wide support for the Syrian army. The chief auditor for the Syrian Defence Ministry, who defected in January 2012, later claimed that 'Russia was shipping [arms] monthly' during 2011 as armed groups emerged among the opposition (Grove and Solomon, 2012; also see Saul, 2014). The Russians also consolidated the administrative apparatus, which is a main feature of any state, by sending tonnes of freshly printed Syrian banknotes after the sanctions which prevented the Assad regime from printing money abroad. Printing banknotes with the image of Assad along with other elements such as rivers and territorial space again consolidates the 'sovereign identity', which Assad and his allies both proclaim. In other words, the territorial state, which is inscribed on these banknotes, becomes a site upon which the principle of sovereign identity marks out the modern state as the 'locus of rational ordered self-identical presence'. It is from this place of identity that the outside of international relations marked by alterity and difference is defined. Within this logic, political order, legitimacy, and identity are ascribed to the sovereign state encased within secure territorial boundaries (Larkins, 1999: 192).

Context also shows that sovereignty has more to do with functionality and how states can remain strong and coherent enough to survive any claims of significant illegitimacy, or 'value incoherence' as Skocpol (1979: 32) has called it. It was from this perspective that we can also assess the behaviour of Russia and the United States in another conflict: Crimea. The US exchanged their positions and it was Obama's narrative which was coherent and consistent this time. He said, 'Any violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity would be deeply destabilising' (CNN, 2014). Obama reiterated this after meeting members of the five Western countries known as the G5: 'We reaffirmed our strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity' and that 'Russia has violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an independent European nation'. (CNN 2014). On the opposite side, and in a less consistent and coherent manner, Russia invoked the R2P doctrine to ensure protection of a Russian-speaking minority. Still, it was Russia which *operationalised* its claims by militarily intervening on the ground.

The articulation of sovereignty has to be contextualised within the Arab Spring which unleashed not only 'democratising waves' but also had implications for sovereignty as the very states and territories upon which the modern state system has been based for nearly a century '...appeared in danger of unravelling' (Fawcett, 2017: 791–792). The undermining of centralised authoritarian rule and the subsequent failure to instal new

legitimate and inclusive governments raised warnings and fears that the region, including Syria, could return the ‘pre-state’ model in which authority is divided between different ethnic, tribal and religious groups (Fawcett, 2017: 792). Assad preyed upon these fears and on the need to protect Syria, the state, and Assad, the ‘centralised’ leader, from decentralised structures of authority. The Arab Spring led to a shift in the regional balance of power, giving greater agency to states like Russia and Iran which ‘repositioned itself in the wake of the Syrian crisis, consolidated its alliance with Assad’ (Fawcett, 2017: 793). The four main regional powers – Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – have also showed little appetite for ‘a major rethinking of the principles of states, borders and sovereignty in the Middle East’ (Fawcett, 2017: 807).

The emergence of ISIS inadvertently supported the sovereignty rhetoric in which the territorial state remains the referent object. ISIS should reject the Westphalian concept of sovereignty as it seeks to transfer to man one of the ‘greatest attributes of Allah’, namely, sovereignty. However, ISIS attempted to re-territorialize rather than de-territorialize Syria by imposing a functioning administrative apparatus in both Iraq and Syria and engaging in territorial expansion. In other words, instead of disrupting the regional order by seeking to abolish internal borders dividing Islamic countries, the Jihadi groups such as ISIS ended up moderating its ‘caliphate logic’ by shifting its ideology in the direction of a ‘state logic’ in order to achieve its political survival (Adraoui, 2017: 934–935). This again can also give validity to rhetoric propagated by Assad and his allies, that is, it is all about getting a hold over ‘territory’ (Presidentassad.net, 2017).

Conclusion

The discourse analysis of all state actors in the Syrian conflict indicates that the world has not yet passed the ‘age of territoriality’. Sovereignty was territorial in the rhetoric of Assad, and Putin moved it into a jurisdictional frame by giving a fragmented Syria its legal institutionalised personality in the world order. Sovereignty, in this sense demonstrated itself to be a ‘legal creature functioning through law and ... (at the) same time a source of law’ (Lansing, 1913: 72); it is both a *stabiliser* and a *legitimiser*. Paradoxically, the coupling of the narratives of Assad and Putin allowed the decoupling of state sovereignty itself – that is, a ‘state shell’, or territorial unit of the state, can survive in a formal legal sense as a *de jure* state, regardless of the contestation of the integrity of its borders and the fragmentation of its territory as a *de facto* state (Fawcett, 2017: 794). These state shells, as shallow and empty as they could be, remain a central element ‘defining the legal parameters and personalities of states’ and present ‘an important aspect of sovereignty’ even if those parameters are temporarily suspended in times of conflict’ (Fawcett, 2017: 795). Again, geography and history stand at the side of this explanation in which the concept of sovereignty works ‘hypocritically’ in different settings. The colonisers of Syria once offered it the ‘legal façade of sovereignty’ while denying it other attributes such as non-intervention.

Remarkably, the ‘hypocritical’ workings of sovereignty were supported by the *factivity* operationalising ‘promises of sovereignty’ that include gaining territory on the ground, military support, and active diplomacy. This operationalisation even extended to practices like printing Syrian banknotes in Russia. These banknotes, used internally by the population, brought ‘an invisible spirit that breathes through a whole people’ (quoted in Morgenthau, 1985: 147) as they are part of everyday interactions in the ‘representational spaces’ of historically embedded signs and images’ that enhance the dominant social order (Lefebvre, 1991: 41–42).

Remarkably, the ‘Westphalian sovereignty’ discourse benefits from the weaknesses of its rivals and even their failures. Russia has long reiterated that ‘Syria will not be another Libya where western intervention, in the name of R2P, led to the ‘complete destruction of the traditional notion of state sovereignty’ (Inozemtsev, 2015). Warning that the West wants to ‘destroy the Syrian state’, Jaafari (the Syrian ambassador to the UN) said, ‘Syria should not be another Libya’ (RT America, 2016).

Finally, the article is a validation to the broader literature on the preservation of the territorial state. The assertion of Assad’s authority, despite high levels of violence:

not only reflects the desire of local states and actors with an interest in the regime’s survival (Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah) and their external supporter (Russia), but also endorses the default position in IR, which is favourable to the preservation of the territorial status quo. (Fawcett, 2017: 800)

The article presents further evidence that the march away from statehood, much anticipated in a globalised world, has not yet occurred since Syria retains its state-like character. It also shifts debate from whether sovereignty features are ‘present’ or ‘absent’ to the dynamics in political practices and relations that either challenge or substantiate what Nick Vaughan-Williams (2012: 5) calls the ‘very imaginary’ within which those claims about ‘presence’ or ‘absence’ are able to make sense at all.

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