

ANITA FAUST<sup>1</sup>**Justifying Conflict – The Use of Stereotypes in, and a Tentative Typology of Narratives of Geopolitical Legitimation****Konfliktusok szükségességének megindoklása – Sztereotípiák használat geopolitikai legitimációs narratívákban és e narratívák kísérleti tipológiája****Abstract**

*Narratives are fundamental to overt warfare, whether kinetic, economic or through other means. Scholarly literature on geopolitical codes has established that narratives of legitimation rely on a standard use of stereotypes depicting the enemy as evil, whose actions are irrational. They often offer a vision of modernization as a reward for the sacrifices undertaken in conflict. The coherence of narratives is also seen as a prerequisite for legitimation to be effective. It is, however, questionable if narratives used to justify conflict do indeed standardly follow these patterns. Upon analyzing the narratives used by the regional powers and by the global power, the United States in the first six months of the Syrian conflict, we have found that the use of stereotypes varies, and can be typified. The vision of modernization is interpreted in the context of national identity, hence its impact may vary. And, several narratives have shortfalls in coherence, diminishing their legitimacy power. A deeper understanding of the nature of narratives may contribute to improving prognoses of escalation and likely outcomes.*

*Keywords: narrative, legitimation, stereotype, geopolitics, Syria*

**Absztrakt**

*A geopolitikai szakirodalom kiterjed a konfliktusok támogatottságának biztosítását szolgáló narratívák vizsgálatára, és azt tételezi, hogy az ellenségkép kialakítását szolgáló sztereotípiák az ellenséget gonoszként és irracionálisan cselekvőként írják le. E mellett jellemzően jobb, korszerűbb életet ígérnek a konfliktussal vállalt áldozat eredményeként. Továbbá, a narratívák akkor szolgálják eredményesen a legitimációt, ha azok koherensek. Kérdéses azonban, hogy valóban ennyire egy-*

<sup>1</sup> Pécsi Tudományegyetem – University of Pécs. E-mail: [faust.anita@gmail.com](mailto:faust.anita@gmail.com). ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1196-7001>

*séges-e a sztereotípiák használatát, az identitásbeli különbségek alapján a modernizáció ígérete egyértelmű hatással bírhat-e, és hogy a gyakorlatban mennyire lehet sikeres a narratívák koherenciájának érvényesítése. A 2011-ben kitört szíriai konfliktusban érintett térségi hatalmak és a globális geopolitikai kóddal rendelkező USA korai narratíváit vizsgálva megállapíthatjuk, hogy a geopolitikai legitimációs narratívák sztereotípiák használatát szerint eltérnek és tipizálhatók, a modernizáció értelmezése sokféle lehet, illetve, a narratívák koherenciája gyakran hiányos, a legitimációs erő rovására. A narratívák mélyebb vizsgálatával a konfliktusok várható eskalációs potenciálja és várható kimenetele prognosztizálhatóbbá válhat.*

*Kulcsszavak: narratíva, legitimáció, sztereotípiák, geopolitika, Szíria*

#### LEGITIMATION IN GEOPOLITICS

Legitimation has been in the focus of public and academic debate since antiquity. Philosophy has interpreted it as stemming from criteria of right and wrong, whilst social or political sciences have examined it in relation to how power is obtained, and how it is exercised. In the practice of power, power is seen as legitimate if it is recognized as rightful by its constituents. Legitimacy ensures stability, the lack thereof makes governments or their policies vulnerable to rejection.<sup>2</sup>

“Geopolitics, as the struggle over the control of geographical entities, focuses upon power, or the ability to achieve particular goals in the face of opposition or alternatives.”<sup>3</sup> As such, it is “both practice and representation”<sup>4</sup>. Legitimation – defined as the successful explanation and justification of actions – is crucial, in as much as geopolitical intentions can only be enacted “if the majority of the population is acquiescent, at least tacitly”.<sup>5</sup> In the present study, we will look at one specific issue of legitimation: the way in which conflict as geopolitical agency is justified in the narratives of the ultimate leaders of state agents.

A fundamental tool used to justify actions are narratives, which are texts, presented orally or in writing, whose role it is to “make sense of the world” and offer a direction to be taken. At the same time, they express identity, simultaneously constructing the identity of the other.<sup>6</sup> A study of narratives used specifically to legitimize geopolitical conflict was offered by Flint<sup>7</sup> within the framework of the concept of geopolitical codes. The concept of

<sup>2</sup> David Beetham: The legitimation of power, Macmillan International Higher Education, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Flint: Introduction to Geopolitics. 3rd edition. Routledge. New York, NY. 2017. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Bamberg: Considering counter narratives, in: Michael Bamberg – Molly Andrews (Eds), Considering counter narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, 2004, 351-372.

<sup>7</sup> Colin Flint: Introduction to Geopolitics, 3rd edition, Routledge, New York, NY, 2017.

geopolitical codes, first introduced by Gaddis<sup>8</sup>, and further developed by Dijkink<sup>9</sup> came to be defined by Flint and Taylor as a given country's "practical geopolitical reasoning", which incorporates the given country's view of the world, and as such, is "highly biased".<sup>10</sup>

Grounded in the assessment of capabilities and interests of any given country, the geopolitical code of a state defines existing and emerging threats, specifies existing and potential allies, outlines how threats are to be countered and alliances strengthened. The final pillar of geopolitical codes is legitimization: how the strategic calculations and planned actions should be presented and justified to the electorate as well as to the international community.

Geopolitical codes can be local, if a state defines its international orientation in terms of its neighbors. It is regional, if its code carries calculations for a wider regional role. It is global if it derives its legitimacy from a global presence as well as an acceptance of its global role by most states, a status it will strive to maintain. In our time, it is the United States of America that has a global geopolitical code.

For the legitimization of geopolitical calculations to be successful, says Flint<sup>11</sup>, it needs to be deeply rooted in the identity of the target audiences, and provide an appealing geopolitical vision, as stipulated by Dijkink.<sup>12</sup> This suggestion is taken further in studies that claim that betterment of life, and more so, modernization is offered as the goal to be attained as the desirable outcome of undergoing the pains of conflict.<sup>13</sup>

We may question, however, whether a narrative by the proponent of conflict with, or in, another country can easily succeed in appealing to their identity and offer them an attractive vision. Can a seemingly universal buzzword like 'modernity' mean the same thing to, or be productive with, different audiences?

When preparing for conflict, potentially involving the loss of lives, a clear case must be made, that presents the conflict as necessary and inevitable. For this end, narratives used to justify war rely on very specific formulae, or stereotypes. One's own stance is presented as moral obligation, whilst the enemy is described as evil and their course of action as irrational. The latter stereotype is required to prove that efforts at negotiation are futile, so war cannot be avoided.<sup>14</sup>

But is it realistic to postulate that all narratives legitimating conflict avail of these types of stereotypes?

For a narrative to have strong legitimacy power, it needs to abide by the fundamental rules of narratives. Relevant to our present study, it needs to be coherent. In a study sug-

<sup>8</sup> John Lewis Gaddis: *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, New York, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Gertjan Dijkink: Geopolitical Codes and Popular Representations, *GeoJournal*, 46, (1998) 293-299

<sup>10</sup> Colin Flint – Peter Taylor: *Political geography*, Taylor & Francis, 2011, 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> Flint, Colin: *Introduction to Geopolitics*, 3rd edition, Routledge, New York, NY, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Gertjan Dijkink: Geopolitical Codes and Popular Representations, *GeoJournal*, 46, (1998) 293-299

<sup>13</sup> Colin Flint: Intertwined Spaces of Peace and War, in: Scott Kirsch – Colin Flint (Eds), *Reconstructing Conflict: Integrating War and Post-War Geographies*, Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, UK, 2011, 31-48.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Flint: *Introduction to Geopolitics*, 3rd edition, Routledge, New York, NY, 2017, 54-55.

gesting that soft power<sup>15</sup> can be better understood if the behavior and communication of a geopolitical agent is viewed and analyzed as a strategic narrative, coherence – that is, the lack of discrediting contradiction – is seen as fundamental to the narratives used, and at the same time applying to agency.<sup>16</sup> Coherence of narratives and actions are crucial, indeed, to building credibility and fostering soft power, but being coherent can be challenging to attain in practice. Furthermore, in his theory of the clash of civilizations, Huntington said that different standards were likely to be used within the boundaries of civilization as opposed to across these boundaries.<sup>17</sup> Relevant to our quest, double standards constitute a type of incoherence. The actual perception of double standards, however, require empirical investigation.

#### METHODOLOGY

Our questions are, whether all narratives used to justify conflict are built on the use of the same combination of stereotypes, whether the vision of modernization can function cross culturally or towards opponents, and how well narratives meet the requirement of coherence.

For the purposes of our examination, we have chosen as case study the Syrian conflict, in the March – August, 2011 time frame. The conflict in Syria broke out amid the Arab Spring uprisings, which placed the region in the focus of international attention, also activating regional geopolitical agents for various reasons, not least out of fear of contagion. This ensured a relative abundance of geopolitical narratives by multiple state leaders, which in turn allows us to study the narratives of very dissimilar geopolitical agents, who are not only different in terms of civilization, but also their geopolitical situation is different.

The choice of studying the narratives of multiple geopolitical agents with a stake in one conflict was made under the assumption that this may be a promising approach to find a sample of different types of narratives, to confirm or disprove that narratives of geopolitical legitimization avail of stereotypes in the same way. Also, due to the geopolitical agents involved, the examination of the sample may shed light on Huntington's assumption regarding double standards across civilizational boundaries.

The narratives selected for analysis are the relevant speeches and/or statements, press releases of the highest-ranking leaders of the stakeholder countries with a regional geopolitical code from within the region affected by the Arab Spring, as well as of the only country with an elaborate global geopolitical code, the USA, and Syria, the country directly affected by the conflict. The regional stakeholder countries that had a regional geopolitical code in the selected time frame are Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel. Of these, Qatar had no narratives pertinent to Syria, whilst the Israeli narratives made only indirect refer-

<sup>15</sup> Joseph S. Nye: Soft power, *Foreign policy* 80 (1990) 153-171.

<sup>16</sup> Laura Roselle – Alister Miskimmon – Ben O'Loughlin: Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power, *Media, War & Conflict* 7.1 (2014) 70-84.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel P. Huntington: "The clash of civilizations?" *Foreign affairs* 72.3 (1993) 22-49, p. 36.

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

ences to Syria, by citing the importance of keeping the 1967 borders, but other than that, did not put forward any narratives about Syria, focusing instead on Iran. Hence, we exclude these two geopolitical agents from our study.

The various geopolitical agents remaining in our study display rather different geopolitical communications strategies and traditions. This, as well as the diverging degrees of involvement in the conflict in the selected time frame underlie the different frequency of communication, and the varying quantities and genres (speech or press statement) of narratives they produced. Only texts available in official English translations have been used. Table 1 provides the samples selected for content analysis.

Country	Date	URL	Comment
Syria	30/03/2011	<a href="http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&amp;catid=117&amp;Itemid=496">http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&amp;catid=117&amp;Itemid=496</a>	
Syria	June, 2011	<a href="http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&amp;catid=117&amp;Itemid=496">http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&amp;view=article&amp;id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&amp;catid=117&amp;Itemid=496</a>	
Iran	21/3/2011	<a href="http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1434/Leader-s-Public-Address-in-Mashhad">http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1434/Leader-s-Public-Address-in-Mashhad</a>	Regional
Iran	30/06/2011	<a href="http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1483/Leader-s-Speech-to-Government-Officials-on-Mab-ath">http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1483/Leader-s-Speech-to-Government-Officials-on-Mab-ath</a>	Regional + Syria
Saudi Arabia	11/08/2011	<a href="https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/saudi-king-calls-end-violence-syria">https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/saudi-king-calls-end-violence-syria</a>	Syria
Turkey	24/04/2011	<a href="http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_111_-24-april-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-events-that-took-place-in-syria-on-friday_-22-april-2011.en.mfa">http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_111_-24-april-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-events-that-took-place-in-syria-on-friday_-22-april-2011.en.mfa</a>	Syria
Turkey	17/06/2011	<a href="http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-146_-17-june-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-meeting-of-ambassadors-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.en.mfa">http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-146_-17-june-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-meeting-of-ambassadors-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.en.mfa</a>	Regional
Turkey	31/07/2011	<a href="http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_178_-31-july-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-recent-developments-in-syria.en.mfa">http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_178_-31-july-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-recent-developments-in-syria.en.mfa</a>	Syria
USA	22/04/2011	<a href="https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/04/22/statement-president-obama-syria">https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/04/22/statement-president-obama-syria</a>	Syria

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

Country	Date	URL	Comment
USA	18/08/2011	<a href="https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria">https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria</a>	Syria

1. Table: List of narratives selected for analysis (last viewed: 12/30/2018) Source: the author.

The criteria of analysis were derived from scholarly literature on the nature of narratives of geopolitical legitimation. The full content of each narrative is matched with the following list of criteria: how they make sense of what is happening; what is being done about the situation; the morality of the own-group; the evil nature of the opponent; the irrationality of the behavior of the opponent; the use of modernity as vision offered; own group values relating to concept of modernity. Parts of narratives that do not fall into any one of these categories are examined to establish their nature, and to see if they follow any kind of pattern relevant to our query. The coherence of the narratives is also analyzed. The analysis performed is strictly qualitative, since the narratives available differ significantly in genre and volume, so neither in terms of proportions, nor in terms of quantity can they be compared.

## FINDINGS

Narratives are presented on a country-by-country basis. Quotes are selected to illustrate the compliance of narratives with criteria established in pertinent literature.

## SYRIA

In President Assad's narratives, what Syria was witnessing was legitimate dissatisfaction and demand for reform, accompanied by conspiracy and sabotage that led to an escalation that has claimed lives: "*Syria is facing a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country.*" He makes a distinction between what he calls legitimate demands and sedition, which obstructs reform and which is to be rejected on moral grounds. "*Burying sedition is a national, moral, and religious duty; and all those who can contribute to burying it and do not are part of it. The Holy Quran says, "sedition is worse than killing," so all those involved intentionally or unintentionally in it contribute to destroying their country. So there is no compromise or middle way in this.*" His narrative claims that part of the reason for the conspiracy is that Syria is in a geopolitically valuable area, and has, throughout its very long history been coveted land. "*I do not think there is a stage in Syria's history where it was not the target of some sort of conspiracy, both before and after independence. Those conspiracies took place for many reasons, some relating directly to the important geopolitical position that Syria occupies.*" The narrative identifies the other reason for the conspiracy as resistance to the Western world order: "*others were linked to its political positions, principles, and interests.*" And:

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

*“Our foreign policy has been based on holding to our national rights, holding to pan-Arab rights, to independence, to supporting Arab resistance when there is occupation.”* The goal of the conspiracy is *“for Syria to get weaker and disintegrate, because this will remove the last obstacle facing the Israel’s plans.”* The goal of the conflict undertaken by the Syrian government and its supporters is *„a future full of hope; hope that our homeland will restore the harmony and tranquillity that it always enjoyed, based on strong foundations of freedom, solidarity and engagement.”* In other words, the Syrian president’s narrative offers a return to normal life as a reward for undertaking the conflict. The reforms legitimately demanded by the people would restore dignity. He categorically rejects sectarianism on a moral ground and also, as a representative of modernity, epitomized by the state being secular, when he says, *„They invoked detestable sectarian discourse which we have never endorsed and in which we only see an expression of a hateful ideology which has never been part of our religion, history or traditions and which has been an anathema and a sacrilege to our national, pan-Arab and moral identity.”* He emphasizes the modernity embodied by a secular Syria by saying, *„It is very sad to see in any society in the world some groups that belong to other bygone ages, that belong to a period we do not live in and we do not belong to.”* The Syrian president’s narrative emphasizes that Syria is different, it is not one in the series of uprisings that sweeps the region: *„When this wave touched Syria, the issue has become of concern to the Syrians. We have to use it as a wave of energy according to our interests. We should be proactive rather than reactive.”* The largest part of the speeches is devoted the reform measures and plans, to the demonstration of the Syrian president’s own credibility, and somewhat less attention is devoted to the events themselves. His narrative lacks coherence in as much as he says that reform measures were not being hastened under pressure, whereas much of his narratives are, indeed, about Syria being under pressure.

## IRAN

Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei welcomes the events of the Arab Spring as an Islamic Awakening and a grassroots movement of dignity against governments subservient to the West. He makes a distinction in the case of Syria, claiming that the uprising is one orchestrated by foreign powers against a government that resists the geopolitical ambitions of the West: *“Today in order to simulate what was done in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and other such countries, America has realized that it should create problems for Syria - which is moving on the path of resistance.”* Clarifying the Iranian stance, he says that Iran is a revolutionary country showing resistance to occupation and hegemony whilst standing up for social justice as befits Islam and as the dignity of the nation requires. The Iranian leader names America and Zionism as its enemies and accuses the US of *“hypocrisy”* and untruthfulness: *“They claim that they are opposed to dictatorship and that they support the rights of nations. They are lying. Not only do they not show mercy to other nations, but they also show no mercy to their own people.”* He calls out the US explicitly as evil in intent in

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

the region, but acting for a rational geopolitical goal when he says, as an example “*You are after Libya’s oil. You want to establish a foothold in Libya. You want to use Libya as a foothold in order to monitor the future revolutionary governments of Egypt and Tunisia, which are located on the east and west of Libya. Your intention is evil.*” Ayatollah Khamenei also accuses the West of using double standards by saying, “*After the tanks of the Saudi government were deployed in the streets of Manama in Bahrain, the Americans showed how shameless they are when they announced that they do not consider the Saudi involvement in Bahrain as foreign interference.*” According to the narratives, Iran supported the protesters in Bahrain not because they were Shia, but because they were oppressed, which is proved by Iranian support for Gaza, whose population is Sunni. The Iranian narrative is suspect of lack of coherence in as much as it calls for support for Syria because it is part of the resistance, whilst shunning social injustices that led to the protests, whereas social justice is fundamental to the narratives of Iranian legitimation.

## SAUDI ARABIA

In his one, brief statement, the King of Saudi Arabia defined the events in Syria as “*bloodshed*”, inherently evil, and called upon the Syrian leader to “*choose wisdom willingly*”, that is, stop the bloodshed that was “*unacceptable*” to the Saudi kingdom, and to enact reforms “*that our brothers in Syria can feel in their lives as dignity, glory and pride.*” The narrative implies that the Syrian government is untruthful, or dragging its feet, since the Saudi narrative carries an urge to Syria to enact real reform, rather than just make promises. Justification for the Saudi stance stems from the Saudi King’s role as „*Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques*” and his invocation of God the Merciful. Apart from the act of the narrative itself, none of its content points to action by Saudi Arabia.

## TURKEY

We have three narratives issued by the Turkish government in the time interval selected, which need to be viewed separately, as they display a significant shift in Turkey’s stance, also reflected in the use of stereotypes. The statement issued in April talks of “*incidents*” in various cities whose victims included security personnel, and which may endanger the stability of Syria. It also speaks of “*mass protests*” driven by the “*legitimate aspirations*” of the people. The statement explicitly welcomes the reform measures taken by the Syrian government and calls for “*maximum restraint*” in the handling of the mass protests. The narrative does not use any stereotypes, does not de-humanize any party to the conflict, does not place blame or accusations, and does not contain any formulae for establishing Turkey’s credibility. It is an expression of goodwill and offers cooperation in this spirit. The second narrative is a press release issued in June, issued following a meeting of ambassadors where the events of the region were discussed. The press release equates the events in Syria with the “*popular mass events*” that were sweeping the region, also referring to it as a “*transition wave*” and a “*belated normalization process*” “*predestined for suc-*

cess”, which needs to take place in a “*peaceful and orderly*” manner. The “*institutional and economic restructuring*” of the region was declared a priority, requiring foreign assistance. The narrative includes thoughts on the identity of Turkey, referring to it “*as a centre of attention and source of inspiration in the region with its successful democratic and economic performance and active foreign policy*”. This presentation of Turkey as role model – that is, functioning in a way that was right for the times – serves as legitimation for playing a more active role, as embraced in the narrative. Further legitimation for action by Turkey is derived from the need for it to be “*meeting the legitimate demands and expectations of the people in a way that will serve regional peace, stability and welfare.*” While establishing credibility entitling Turkey to a more active role, still not stereotypes are to be found in the narrative. The third statement, which was issued at the end of July, defines Syria’s government as the enemy, and carries stereotypes of it being evil and irrational in its actions: “*many have been killed and wounded in the operations launched this morning against the residents of Hama who have refrained from violence from the outset and strived to engage in dialogue with the administration.*” The stereotype of impiety, or godlessness of the Syrian government also appears in the narrative where it says, “*Turkey (...) is deeply disappointed and saddened by these developments on the eve of holy Ramadan as rest of the Islamic world.*” The narrative also explicitly questions the sincerity, hence, credibility, of the Syrian government by stating, “*The current developments raise suspicions regarding the intention and sincerity of the Syrian administration to resolve the issue through peaceful methods.*” The action by Turkey is the act of issuing this narrative. It carries all the stereotypes of justification of conflict, questions the credibility of the Syrian leadership, and, as such stance appears to require, contains passages that construct the credibility of Turkey over the issue. These passages refer to the patience exercised by Turkey, the close attention it paid to events unfolding in Syria, and brings in as witness the international community, whose observations Turkey shares.

#### USA

In President Obama’s narrative what happened in the Middle East, Syria included, was that “*the people have risen up to demand their basic human rights.*” It is a “*story of self-determination*”, against “*humiliation*”, corruption and backwardness, for dignity and democracy. It is the same phenomenon throughout the region, “*whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sanaa or Tehran*”. The moderately detailed, emblemized overview of the events of the region and of Syria are enriched by a small number of episodes highlighted in detail, such as, “*In Syria, we see it in the courage of those who brave bullets while chanting, “peaceful, peaceful.”*” The narrative presents the historical and present-day foundations of American credibility and moral standing engrained in the American identity. “*Our own nation was founded through a rebellion against an empire. Our people fought a painful Civil War that extended freedom and dignity to those who were enslaved. And I would not be standing here today unless past generations turned to the moral force of nonviolence as*

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

*a way to perfect our union -- organizing, marching, protesting peacefully together to make real those words that declared our nation: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."* These provide stark contrast against the description of the enemy, which heavily relies on the stereotypes of evil and of irrational action. President Assad would not listen to the encouragement of the US to embrace democracy and human rights, and the members of the Syrian government *"have placed their personal interests ahead of the interests of the Syrian people, resorting to the use of force and outrageous human rights abuses to compound the already oppressive security measures in place before these demonstrations erupted."* Taking their cues from the wrong country, Iran, instead of assuming responsibility, *"Instead of listening to their own people, President Assad is blaming outsiders while seeking Iranian assistance in repressing Syria's citizens through the same brutal tactics that have been used by his Iranian allies."* In addition to stating that *"Assad must go"*, the narrative lists actions to be taken against the Syrian government by the US, expecting the measures to be followed by the international community. It is at this point that the coherence of president Obama's narrative falls short. *"The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement. What the United States will support is an effort to bring about a Syria that is democratic, just, and inclusive for all Syrians. We will support this outcome by pressuring President Assad to get out of the way of this transition, and standing up for the universal rights of the Syrian people along with others in the international community."* The intended action of the US is also elaborated with the following: *"Today I want to make it clear that it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal."*

## DISCUSSION

The narratives of what happened vary in how detailed they are, whether they offer context or focus on episodes of symbolic value. The elaboration of the events is a significant source of legitimation for the course of action announced. The presentation of what to do about the situation also varies in how much detail is provided, and there are instances where the narrative itself serves as primary action. The focus on moral standing put forth in the narratives appears to be aligned with the nature and intensity of action and involvement announced.

The most significant variance in narratives is in the use of stereotypes assigned to the enemy. In our sample there is one instance of narrative – the first statement by Turkey – that does not use any stereotypes, and this narrative does not take sides in the conflict. All other narratives avail of the stereotype of the enemy being 'evil'. The narratives of Iran and Syria's leaders describe the foreign enemy as evil but working towards a 'rational' geopolitical goal. The other narratives stereotype the enemy as 'irrational'. A subset of stereotypes present the enemy as 'not adhering to Islam'. These are used within the boundaries of

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

Islamic civilization and may fall in the same category as the stereotype of irrational action, as they suggest that the enemy may be beyond repair.

Based on these differences in the use of stereotypes, three types of narratives can be defined.

Ones that present the enemy as 'evil' and 'irrational' constitute one group. This is what Flint's work describes as justification for war due not only to moral obligation, but also the impossibility of any other means of resolving problems. This implies that this use of stereotypes may be typical of geopolitical agents interested in the start of an armed conflict. We may call narratives availing of this combination of stereotypes as proactive narratives.

Those narratives that describe the enemy as 'evil' but quite 'rational' in their geopolitical intent belong in a different category, because, following Flint's logic, kinetic war is not necessarily the only option conceivable against an enemy that is acting rationally. Geopolitical agents using this type of narrative appear interested in avoiding armed conflict. This category of narratives we may call reactive.

In our sample we also had one instance of a narrative that avoided the use of stereotypes. This was the first statement issued by the Turkish government, whose stance later changed, reflected in the appearance of stereotypes. The narrative without stereotypes does not designate an enemy, nor does it call for action. It signals that the geopolitical agent is paying attention, but without intent of interference at the time of the communication. It wishes to be reckoned with but defers taking a stance. We may refer to such narratives as neutral.

If we examine the interaction of the proactive and reactive narratives, we may observe in our sample that proactive narratives aim to deny the enemy the right and the opportunity to be heard. Reactive narratives in turn attempt to deny the enemy its credibility in its moral standing, hence, its legitimation.

Several narratives have inherent issues with coherence. This appears to correlate with depth of involvement in the conflict on the level of narratives. The shortcomings in coherence were related to the core aspect of the stance taken, the component that most required legitimation.

Double standards, as defined by Huntington, and which constitute a form of incoherence, are called out in one instance, by Iran. Here we find criticism of a geopolitical agent belonging in one civilization judging differently actions by two agents belonging in another civilization. This raises the likelihood of different standards being used along alliances rather than civilizations.

Significant parts of narratives are devoted to constructing the speaker's and the state's own credibility, and to deconstructing the credibility of the enemy.

The concept of 'modernity' is present in most narratives, but the interpretation of modernity varies pending the values held by each country. While the vision of modernity offered in US narratives means becoming a liberal democracy, and a knowledge-based society, Turkey sees itself as a model nation with a stable democracy and conscious foreign policy. Iran refers to itself as revolutionary, awakened in Islam, focused on social justice.

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

Syria's narrative views having a secular state as being modern. Thus, the use of modernity as vision justifying conflict may in some cases be cancelled by the identity of the target audience. It may become a destabilizing factor, however, if the geopolitical vision offered by the leadership of the state being challenged is not widely shared by its population.

The concept of modernity entails viewing the enemy as backward. In Syrian narrative, those involved in sectarian violence are referred to as backward, but not the US, which is also referred to as an enemy. 'Backwardness' appears to be one of the stereotypes used in proactive narratives. Hence, the Syrian narrative may be viewed as reactive to the US and at the same time proactive against domestic enemies.

The concept of 'dignity' is one of the key words in most narratives. Less multifaceted than modernity, dignity is also derived from different values. In some narratives it means insisting on sovereignty, in others as people power in the domestic arena, while elsewhere it is related to welfare. Table 2 gives an overview of findings.

Criterion	Syria	Iran	Saudi Arabia	Turkey 1	Turkey 2	USA
What happened	detailed	contextual	minimal	minimal neutral	more detailed	symbolic episodes
Own action/ intentions	detailed	contextual	act of narrative	goodwill	act of narrative: condemn	✓
Own moral stance	✓	✓	religious	act of narrative	✓	✓
Enemy evil	✓	✓	strongly implied	-	✓	✓
Enemy irrational	-	-	should bow to God	-	✓	✓
Enemy lies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rebels lie</li> <li>• USA mistaken</li> </ul>	✓	implied	-	✓	✓
Enemy backward	rebels	-	-	-	-	✓
Own credibility	Detailed	✓	-	minimal	more extensive than before	detailed
Dignity	✓	✓	✓	-	-	✓

2. Table - Overview of findings. Source: the author.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have examined the narratives of stakeholders in the Syrian crisis in its first six months, in order to verify or disprove claims in scholarly literature about the nature of narratives used to justify conflict. We have found that a typology of proactive, reactive, neutral and mixed narratives can be established based on the use of stereotypes. We have also identified new categories of stereotypes. The vision of dignity appears to be as important as that of modernity, but both are strewn with identity-related complexities.

A study of how the narratives of the topmost leaders of states justifying conflict translates into media may provide more insight into international confrontation in the information sphere. A more extensive examination of tendencies in the use of stereotypes and entry into conflict may serve as a supplementary means of assessing geopolitical risks and situations.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bamberg, Michael: Considering counter narratives, in: Michael Bamberg – Molly Andrews (Eds), *Considering counter narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, 2004, 351-372. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/sin.4>
2. Beetham, David: *The legitimization of power*, Macmillan International Higher Education, 2013.
3. Dijkink, Gertjan: Geopolitical Codes and Popular Representations, *GeoJournal*, 46 (1998) 293-299. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006999221884>
4. Flint, Colin – Taylor, Peter: *Political geography*, Taylor & Francis, 2011.
5. Flint, Colin: Intertwined Spaces of Peace and War, in: Scott Kirsch – Colin Flint (Eds), *Reconstructing Conflict: Integrating War and Post-War Geographies*, Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, UK, 2011, 31-48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315604008-11>
6. Flint, Colin: *Introduction to Geopolitics*, 3rd Edition, Routledge, New York, NY, 2017.
7. Gaddis, J. Lewis: *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982.
8. Huntington, Samuel P.: The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, 72.3 (1993) 22-49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>
9. Roselle, Laura – Miskimmon, Alister – O'Loughlin, Ben: Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power, *Media, War & Conflict*, 7.1 (2014) 70-84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213516696>

## NARRATIVES EXAMINED IN THE RESEARCH

1. President Bashar Al-Assad's Speech at the People's Assembly. March 30, 2011. [http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&catid=117&Itemid=496](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&catid=117&Itemid=496)  
Last viewed: 02/08/2019
2. President Bashar Al-Assad's Damascus University Speech. June, 2011. [http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&catid=117&Itemid=496](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&catid=117&Itemid=496) Last viewed: 02/08/2019

## HADTUDOMÁNYI SZEMLE

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2019.1.2>

2019. XII. évfolyam 1. szám

3. Ayatollah Khamenei's Public Address in Mashhad. March 21, 2011. <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1434/Leader-s-Public-Address-in-Mashhad> Last viewed: 02/08/2019
4. Ayatollah Khamenei's Speech to Government Officials on Mab'ath. June 30, 2019. <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1483/Leader-s-Speech-to-Government-Officials-on-Mab-ath> Last viewed: 02/08/2019
5. Saudi King Calls for End to Violence in Syria. August 11, 2011. <https://www.saudiembassy.net/press-release/saudi-king-calls-end-violence-syria> Last viewed: 08/02/2019
6. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Press Release Regarding the Events that took place in Syria on Friday, 22 April 2011. April 24, 2011. [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_111\\_-24-april-2011\\_-press-release-regarding-the-events-that-took-place-in-syria-on-friday\\_-22-april-2011.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_111_-24-april-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-events-that-took-place-in-syria-on-friday_-22-april-2011.en.mfa) Last viewed: 08/02/2019
7. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Press Release Regarding the Meeting of Ambassadors in the Middle East and North Africa. June 17, 2011. [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-146\\_-17-june-2011\\_-press-release-regarding-the-meeting-of-ambassadors-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-146_-17-june-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-meeting-of-ambassadors-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.en.mfa) Last viewed: 08/02/2019
8. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Press Release Regarding the Recent Developments in Syria. July 31, 2011. [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_178\\_-31-july-2011\\_-press-release-regarding-the-recent-developments-in-syria.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_178_-31-july-2011_-press-release-regarding-the-recent-developments-in-syria.en.mfa) Last viewed: 08/02/2019
9. President Barack Obama. A Statement by President Obama on Syria. April 22, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/04/22/statement-president-obama-syria> Last viewed: 08/02/2019
10. President Barack Obama. Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa. May 19, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa> Last viewed: 08/02/2019
11. President Barack Obama. Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria. August 18, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria> Last viewed: 08/02/2019