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Baath Party all night long

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Robin Jones



Using videos of Western-style parties in Syria, the Assad regime has sought to portray itself as a defender of liberal modernity against benighted “terrorist” opponents. Yet these crude and dishonest propaganda efforts only underscore the oppression at the heart of Assad’s state, writes Robin Jones.

Lights flash in blue, red, and purple shades. The sound of electronic dance music—EDM, the chart-oriented phenomenon and soundtrack to countless club nights,

festivals, and house parties—blasts through the speakers. Young people dance, and a woman's long hair waves to and fro. Another grips her partner's shoulder. The DJ adjusts his headphones and twists the knobs on his mixer. The anticipation builds as the drums accelerate. Fists pump high in the air. Flames rise from the stage. A heavy, bassy beat drops, and the crowd goes ecstatic. The drums give way to a longing vocal sample. The blurred lights fade to darkness. Then comes the punchline: this is not Miami, Berlin, Las Vegas, or Ibiza; it is Aleppo in 2016—at the height of the Syrian regime's bloody military campaign to retake the city in its entirety.

The above describes a [short video clip](#) of a dance party posted on the English-language Twitter account of the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the regime's official media outlet. The accompanying tweet reads: “#Aleppo, now dubbed as the ‘World's Most Dangerous City’, still boasts a thriving nightlife, as shown in one of this summer's events #Syria.”

If not for this text and the revelation at the video's conclusion, viewers could be forgiven for guessing the party took place in any Western metropolis—there are no telltale signs of war, nor distinguishing elements that could be perceived as indicating a Middle Eastern context. The video is not a one-off: SANA has posted similar clips of dance parties in Tartous and Damascus. Why is nightlife of any importance to the Syrian regime, and why in particular would it seek to depict party scenes nearly indistinguishable from their Western equivalents?

These videos should be read as part of the Syrian regime's framing of the war as one between a secular state and a

terrorist insurgency, which coheres with dominant narratives of the “War on Terror” and the “clash of civilizations.” Publicized on English-language social media pages, the videos offer a familiar shorthand for Western publics to conceptualize the Syrian war through tropes of liberalism versus illiberalism; modernity versus backwardness; stability versus chaos; secularism versus extremism; and sexual liberation versus repression.

While dance parties may seem like a crude means of propaganda in the context of one of the most brutal wars of the modern age, such tropes have clearly influenced Western media narratives on Syria, particularly as Islamist hardliners have come to occupy a central place in popular understandings of the war. A distinct genre of articles on nightlife and partying in Syria has emerged in a range of outlets such as [The Huffington Post](#), [The Daily Mail](#), [NPR](#), and [VICE](#). While wartime revelry is not an inherently illegitimate topic to cover, it is one that tends toward sensationalism. Indeed, many of these pieces ultimately forward a similar narrative to SANA’s videos—by contrasting “conservative” opposition areas to Damascus dance parties, for instance, without interrogating how social class and proximity to Western normative lifestyles might shape one’s experiences of fun and pleasure, or considering how sexualized notions of modernity are used to justify violence against those deemed un-modern. This is to say nothing of how these topics have been treated by media sources overtly supportive of the Assad regime, such as [Russian state media](#) and [TeleSUR English](#).

These partying videos instrumentalize gender mixing and open female sexuality, conspicuously portraying unveiled women dancing with men in alcohol-infused settings. Yet

the regime's use of gendered imagery, intended to establish its social liberalism relative to the patriarchal rule of Islamist opposition groups, does not translate to greater rights and freedoms for women in Syria. Not only are women subject to arbitrary arrest, torture, rape, and killing at the hands of state security agencies—forms of violence used against all dissident Syrians, though gendered in their implementation—but they are also on unequal footing with men as per the letter of the law. So-called “honor killings,” for instance, are treated more leniently than other murders, as stipulated by [Article 548](#) of the penal code. Syria's recently amended personal status laws, which pertain to such issues as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, ~~offer no legal protection to women~~ against domestic violence or marital rape. The conception of sexual freedom presented in the above videos, then, is limited to the sphere of mass consumption in spaces influenced by Western partying culture.

But consistency is not the point. Rather, in a social media climate characterized by conflicting narratives of the Syrian war and conspiratorial interpretations of events, these videos serve to destabilize notions of truth and falsehood—to sow doubt about what is “really going on” in Syria. Apologists of the Syrian regime have often sought to challenge claims of war crimes through a discourse of skepticism, particularly surrounding the regime's use of chemical weapons and the legitimacy of videos produced by the White Helmets, the Syrian first responder group. Read in this context, the dance party videos seek to raise further questions about the reliability of audiences' knowledge by projecting an image of normalcy and business-as-usual that confounds expectations surrounding a country at war.

Yet it is notable that these videos do not refute or even address allegations of state violence. Rather, what the first video mentioned implicitly seeks to contest is whether Aleppo is “dangerous”—and for some Syrians, it suggests, it may not be. Dance parties and nightlife scenes are indicative of new consumption habits that have gained purchase among Syrian cosmopolitan elites and aspirational urban middle classes; social strata which benefitted from the aggressive liberalization of the economy throughout the 2000s, and were subsequently less likely than working-class and poor Syrians to emphatically support the 2011 uprising. Through partying videos, the Syrian regime seeks to promote its narrative of the war first to Western audiences, who are encouraged to identify with middle- and upper-class Syrians in urban areas who live relatable secular lifestyles, and second to these Syrians themselves, on whose behalf the regime proposes to defend liberal social mores from the onslaught of terrorist hordes.

While less privileged classes of Syrians—many of whom embraced the uprising and became the targets of state violence throughout the war—are literally absent from the dance floor, they nevertheless figure into these videos as a foil to be implicitly contrasted with the modernity of the dance party. These videos do not merely contest the veracity of claims of state violence against these populations, but also provide a justification for it: terrorism must be crushed to secure a modern lifestyle for a segment of the population, in which the dance party can take place.

A [video](#) of a party at a luxurious resort in the coastal city of Tartous, posted on the SANA Twitter page in 2016, seeks to establish this regime-controlled region as a locus of normalcy and modernity to be contrasted with opposition-

held areas of Syria. The night-time footage showcases a skyline of modern buildings. A bar serves well-known liquor brands such as Stolli and women shake their hips and butts; this direct depiction of alcohol and female sexuality serves to position the Syrian state in opposition to political Islam and its attendant cultural politics.

According to [Syria Deeply](#), the song played in this video—an aggressive style of “trap” EDM—is named “Bomb a Drop,” a darkly fitting title that hints at larger semiotic parallels between the dance party and state violence. To name another instance of this dynamic, the video’s footage from above, likely shot by drones, might be read in the context of aerial attacks responsible for a large proportion of the war’s civilian casualties; this vantage point is a manifestation of state power.

A SANA tweet accompanying the video draws a direct parallel with a Western clubbing mecca, reading: “Forget #Ibiza... the resorts on #Syria’s coastline came alive during #Summer2016 as shown here near #Tartous #SummerInSyria #SyrianCoast.” These hashtags uphold a normative experience of summer, one seemingly intended to confound expectations surrounding Syria—the weather is nice, the alcohol is flowing, and all is well. The comparison with Ibiza, however tongue-in-cheek, situates Tartous within global clubbing culture, and the scene of the events—a tourist resort—is also a place of mobility and transnational connections.

A further [video](#) of a public outdoor party in Damascus, posted on SANA’s Twitter account in 2016, features music at the intersection of electronic dance and top 40s pop—recognizable American radio songs with vocals and a

consistent beat. Dubbed a “color marathon” by the regime, the event seems reminiscent of popular Western corporate running parties such as The Color Run and Color Me Rad, minus most of the running. This bland, modern, and commercial mode of fun, mildly sexual yet never debauchorous, coheres with the regime’s narrative of normalcy. The slogan “I love Damascus”—“love” represented by a heart, as in “I love New York”—adorns T-shirts worn by attendees, is featured on a large sign at the center of the public square, and serves as a hashtag promoted by SANA on Twitter. The background image of a [now-inactive SANA Twitter page](#) displays a young woman at this event, sporting multicolored paint streaks on her face and body and wearing the same shirt, as she sits on a man’s shoulders and takes a selfie from above with her smartphone. Such imagery becomes salient to the regime through implicit contrast with the patriarchal order that its supporters have sought to associate with the opposition through the gendered discourse of terrorism.

Notably, SANA’s Arabic language YouTube account posted a [different recording](#) of the color marathon on YouTube. In this video, Arabic music is playing, including nationalistic songs and a more subdued number by the Lebanese superstar Fairouz, pointedly titled “I Love Damascus”—a far cry from Western EDM. Moreover, in contrast to the prominent role of female sexuality in the English video, middle-aged men are also shown in the Arabic clip, which appears here as more of a walking race than an outdoor rave. The editing in the English clip is slicker and the pacing of the cuts much faster; the mood of the event is entirely different in the two videos. Altogether, the Arabic version feels more reminiscent of standard modes of Baathist public spectacle and state media representation. Yet there are

also striking continuities between older Syrian state symbolism and the modern corporate advertising techniques of the English video: “I love Damascus” bears distinct similarities to “We love Assad,” a slogan displayed at the opening ceremony of the 1987 Mediterranean Games in Latakia (as discussed in Lisa Wedeen’s *Ambiguities of Domination*). Though the two videos target different audiences, it would be simplistic to say the English clip was made for foreign viewing and the Arabic for domestic consumption, given the former’s potential appeal to the regime’s local constituencies. Rather, by publishing two very different videos of the same event, the regime’s social media apparatuses seek to manage tensions between longstanding discourses of resistance and steadfastness in the face of Western imperialism on the one hand, and new sexually-infused consumerist appeals which directly imitate Western forms of modernity on the other.

Returning to the English clip, its depiction of the color marathon as a mass gathering of youth partying in a public square could also be read as a response to the narrative of the 2011 Arab uprisings as youth revolutions. The video represents the mimetic replacement of revolting youth with partying youth—much as consumer-oriented “top 40s” electronic dance music itself draws on forms of rave music with an anti-authoritarian history.

Perhaps it is the collective gathering itself which is being appropriated in these videos; the desires, joys, spontaneities, and communal characteristics of a revolution, regurgitated by the state in proto-fascist form. The videos are also indicative of the contested and malleable nature of culture as a field, and its potential usages toward both emancipatory and oppressive political

ends. Most importantly, the integration of dance parties into the Syrian regime's violent project demonstrates the need to think beyond liberal and modernist binaries—used in this case to encourage Western audiences to identify with others whose lifestyles seem like theirs, rather than rural, pious, subaltern, or working-class Syrians more likely to be facing state violence—and to imagine emancipatory politics, especially concerning gender and sexuality, in a multiplicity of forms.

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