

Romancing the Nation: Politics of Love and Blood in Syrian Popular Culture

Abstract

In spanning the era of the two Assads (father and son) up to 2007 (the year of the referendum that confirmed Bashar al-Assad's continuation as president), and songs produced during the war, this study will explore the role of 'love' (*hub*) and its relation to 'blood' (*dam*) in the continuity and persistence of heroism in national narrative. As a form of politics, love and blood have served the Baathist state in obtaining and using power and domination. This article investigates the various ways in which love as a political tool has been instrumentalized to legitimize the regime and construct national ties and unity. As such, this study interrogates the connection between the sacralisation of the nation and the construction of love as a political and cultural tool to subject loyalty and subordination in political culture. Understanding discursive appropriations of love in this way offers a fresh perspective into the meaning—and most importantly, the politics—of love in modern Syria and its relation to Baathism, Syrian uprising, and popular culture. In this context, the use of the term 'love' (*hub*) by the opposition has become a confirmatory tool of the regime's illegitimacy. While 'love' as a political tool has been instrumentalized by the Baath regime to consolidate authority, Syrians now face many challenges. One of these challenges is not only reversing this imposed 'love' with hate or anger towards the regime but, more importantly, rationalizing nationhood and national membership through focusing on establishing civic engagement and representation.

Introduction

In the early days of the 2011 Syrian uprisings, one of the most remarkable chants widely heard among protestors was: “We don’t love you; We don’t love you! . . . Go away with your party!” It might be surprising to outside observers why so many Syrians chose to express their opposition to the regime in these terms. The answer can be found in the way that Syrian national identity and regime loyalty has been saturated with emotional appeals based on familial rhetoric of “love” and “blood.” I have studied these political and cultural narratives extensively, particularly as they are expressed in speeches and songs, and I have noticed the remarkable persistence and universality of images of blood-ties—family, brothers, sisters, husbands, mothers, forefathers, homeland—as they are leveraged to create the emotional foundations of inclusion and exclusion in the rhetoric of the Baathist state. In this context, the use of the term ‘love’ (*hub*) by the opposition has become a confirmatory tool of the regime’s illegitimacy.

Classic studies of nationalism define the nation in terms of shared pain, love and sacrifice, a notion identified as early as 1882 by Ernest Renan in his celebrated speech ‘What is a Nation?’. Conceptualising the nation as a ‘large-scale solidarity constituted by the feeling of sacrifices that one has made in the past and those that one is prepared to make in the future’, he argues that ‘suffering in common unifies more than joy does’. A century later, Benedict Anderson continued to interrogate why ‘imagining’ the nation had been associated with nationalism bedevilled by the ‘colossal sacrifice’ of commemorated wars (2006: 149). It is worth noting that most scholarship has addressed the commemoration of recent wars and national cults of heroic soldiers as part of the nation-building process (Smith, 2001).

While there has been plethora of scholarships studying the role of songs (Cooke, 2017), less has been dedicated to how ‘love’ is politicised and contextualised in an authoritarian

context. Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a pioneer Syrian writer, has importantly addressed the notion of love in Syrian political culture and the danger of conflating the two spheres: private with the public. As he states: ‘the political domain stands between love and war’ where the leader ‘acts as a lover, politics becomes manipulated and fails to manage plurality, and the door opens to war’ (2020). However, we know less about the connection between the sacralisation of the nation and the construction of love as a political and cultural tool to subject loyalty and subordination in political culture. So far, scholars and pundits have failed to consider why an authoritarian regime would command an emotional legitimacy to maintain its survival. Related to this oversight is underestimating the capacity of the systematic propagation of ‘love’ in influencing group behaviour, impacting political judgments and, consequently, producing political subjectivities.

The nationalist songs and speeches that I analyse below reveal the ways in which national belonging and identity are intertwined with what Bauer calls ‘ego’ (1996 [1924]: 36). Yet this ego is constructed as inseparable from projecting ‘love’ as a national perquisite. In spanning the era of the two Assads (father and son) up to 2007 (the year of the referendum that confirmed Bashar al-Assad’s continuation as president), and songs produced during the war, this study will explore the role of ‘love’ (*hub*) and its relation to ‘blood’ (*dam*) in the continuity and persistence of heroism in national narrative. As a form of politics, love and blood have served the Baathist state in obtaining and using power and domination. This article investigates the various ways in which love as a political tool has been instrumentalized to legitimize the regime and construct national ties and unity.

Ba’thist Loving

When interpreting the etymology of ‘*hub*’ in the Syrian political culture, pioneer Syrian ideologue Michael Aflaq leaned heavily on the unilinear conception of ‘hub’ essentializing it as ineradicably ontological. The Assad regime has used such language from the beginning, drawing rhetorical power from Syrian state ideologues such as Michael Aflaq, who in the early Baathist era endorsed a philosophically Romantic view of national belonging. In his 1940 essay, “Nationalism Is Love Before Anything Else,” Aflaq drew a direct line between unconditional love (*hub*) for one’s family and loyalty to the state. These affective ties are viewed in Aflaq’s work as binding the individual to obligations of submission, sacrifice, and a heroic readiness to die for the national community: “Nationalism is like every love . . . and as love it is associated with sacrifice, and the sacrifice for nationalism leads to heroism” (Aflaq 1940: n.p.). According to Aflaq, the very attempt to rationalise and objectify the idea of nationalism by drawing examples of Western nationalism should be rejected (Aldoughli, 2017). Aflaq criticised the abstraction of the idea of nationalism as it “strips things of their flesh and blood, and robs them of colour and taste” (Aflaq, 1940). More specifically, Aflaq emphasised that nationalism is “faith” and “love”, which can be felt by the heart but not the mind, and such feeling of national sentiments precedes all knowledge and practical definitions (ibid). In the course of Aflaq’s conception of the nation as a cultural entity, he assumes that nationalism is involuntary, and based on unconditional love of the nation. He further establishes a connection between the individual’s love of the family and of the nation. This ultimate recognition of the nation as a “big family” has spiritual connotations, which determine the forceful belonging to it (ibid.) and, more importantly, prepare individuals for the passive submission to the love of the nation through sacrifice and heroism.

Another Syrian nationalist thinker such as Sati al-Husri conceptualized national belonging as a form of maternal love where priority is given to men ready to protect the nation’s glory (*majd*) (1985a: 27–29). Such emotional construct of the nation is evidenced as al-Husri

declares that preserving the nation's glory is directed by maternal love. This portrayal of national love reflects the patriarchization of the man-woman relationship that is based on subordination and coercion. According to al-Husri (1951: 238–39), it is this nationalistic and patriotic love that will awaken sentiments in people to struggle and sacrifice for national glory and unity: “We must remember that the nationalist idea enjoys a self-motivating power; it is a driving impulse to action and struggle. When it enters the mind and dominates the soul, it is one of the forces that awakens the people [*al-sha‘b*] and inspires them to sacrifice.” From these words we can derive a picture of an overwhelmingly representation that conceptualizes readiness to fight as a main characteristic that defines national belonging through further idealizing physical sacrifice. Hence this juxtaposition between the assertion of nationalistic love and the ability to sacrifice for the national struggle subsequently defines the concept of belonging (al-Husri 1985b: 40).

Following Aflaq and al-Husri, Zaki al-Arsuzi (1973: 341) conceptualized national belonging as preceding any philosophical or theoretical knowledge, which means that national love is unconditional and involuntary. He believed not only that the nation is an extension of the family from “a spiritual perspective” but that the resemblance between the love of family and that of nation lies in the readiness to sacrifice “brothers” (344). While it is not unusual for national identity to be associated with the commemoration of warfare and masculine struggle on behalf of the state (Smith 2001; Aldoughli, 2017), the Assad regime has gone to extreme lengths to institutionalize these ideologues’ “virtues” and present them as a required form of emotional attachment for all legitimate citizens.

Love under Hafez

After Hafez al-Assad's (HA) ascendance to power in 1970s, creating and maintaining loyalty has been a necessity. The regime strove to secure loyalties using a strong national ideology that

would compete with pre-existing religious, sectarian, and ethnic loyalties. This ideology strove to homogenize Syrians brushing them all in one colour of Baathism as the only acceptable national affiliation one can/should have. Baathism was the melting-pot to the overarching heterogenous Syrian societies (Aldoughli, 2021). Given the contentious difficulty in ruling a multi-ethnic and multi sectarian communities in Syria, the regime has constructed an illusionary, yet effective blood bond among Syrians to maintain legitimacy. As regime ideologues have theorized “blood” as a rhetorical tool to define and promote the nation, to the extent that children of my generation were forced in elementary school to memorize and repeat the slogan: “with blood and soul, we sacrifice ourselves for you, Hafez!” To whatever extent this emotional national affinity does exist, it is grounded not in organic ties of familial affection but rather in top-down, enforced ideologies (Aldoughli, 2016). This brings me to how I define ‘blood’ in this article as not based on physical relations (rawabit jasadiyyah), but a constrictively nationalist discourse that has been instrumentalised by the Baath regime since 1970s.

In this regard, such simple, yet zealous and dangerously intense emotions expressed in one sentence, holds two caveats: first, by appealing to common blood through the readiness to sacrifice, the Baath regime constructed an ethnonationalism based not on the origin of one blood but an illusion of blood bond realised through the devotion to sacrifice; second, the conceptualisation of the nation as a soul in early Syrian national thought has shifted from being the mantle of Syrian nationalism-to become the personification of Assad (Aldoughli, 2017; 2019a). My perception of ‘blood’ relations as a constructed social reality in the Syrian context stems from two interrelated yet contradictory arguments: First, the heterogeneous nature of the Syrian communities refutes blood relations as a defining characteristics of group identity, however, ‘blood’ as a notion is still very dominantly used and mobilised as a relational category that defines belonging, identity and loyalty in Syrian history. This fixation on ‘blood’ is evident

in the early writings of Syrian ideologues who had to explain extensively that the nation is not based on 'physical kinship, but a psychological one (Aldoughli, 2016). On the other hand, these ideologues had theorised blood as a constructivist and instrumentalist tool to form the nation, logicalizing entitlement to belonging to the nation as based on one's readiness to die for the nation.

The theorization of the 'homeland' as a cultural construct takes centre stage where love and blood become intertwined as forms of national affirmations. Syrians were depicted in HA's speeches between 1970s and 1990s, particularly the one delivered in 1973, as 'brothers' confirming the familial ties, which in turn eliminate any establishment of civic institutionalization of national membership. In another speech from 1980,¹ commemorating the seventeenth anniversary of the Baathist coup, HA makes vague references to the heroic deeds of the "grandfathers" (*ajdad*), while stating that the goal of the regime is to build "a society dominated by love, because this land does not have anything but love." Growing out of Romantic national sentiment, these invocations of emotional attachment circulated continuously in Syrian society, exerting a magnetic pull; but they foregrounding the Syrian state, somewhat more than Hafez himself, as the locus of familial affection.

Another valuable source for interpreting the evolution of nationalist discourse in the HA era is the romantic songs that were endorsed and propagated by the regime. With themes of emotive bonds and sacrificial heroism, these narratives remained fully grounded in depicting the state-people relationship as based on love, while foregrounding the Syrian state as the locus of affection.

¹ HA speech 1980: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tduY8lxBXFc>

The song “*Rāyatik bil-’āli ya Suriya*” (Your Flags Are Forever High, Oh Syria), was written in 1973 in the context of the October War. It begins with statements that appear to be the regretful devotions of a lapsed lover: “You are my eternal love, oh the sun that shines tenderness / It is we who used to protect you, our homeland.” As the song continues, the Syrian nation is revealed to be a caring mother, whose children are called upon to defend her dignity and honor. Another highly canonical song written during the October War is “*Suriya yā habībatī*” (Oh, My Beloved Syria), which again presents strong familial allusions by personifying the homeland as a female lover. In addition to the gendered component of these sentimental narratives, it is notable how far removed such national ideals are from the concept of voluntary civic participation. Rather than a free and rational choice to support beneficial civic institutions, love for the state and its leadership is presented as an involuntary romantic compulsion, heedless of thought or reason.

For the Love of Bashar

The rhetoric digressed even further, however, when Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as the leader of the Syrian Baath Party in the year 2000. Some observers believed that the relatively Westernized and youthful Assad would move Syria towards a more democratic style of governance. These optimistic views proved to be unfounded, as Bashar in fact oversaw a discursive adaptation in which the Romanticism of the Assad personality cult actually increased, from the stern-yet-affectionate father-image projected by Hafez al-Assad during his later years, to a more passionate and forceful presentation of the family legacy by the youthful Bashar.

Eschewing the solidarity rhetoric of “brothers and sisters,” Bashar al-Assad gravitated toward an oppressive and demanding concept of “love” as emotional bonds between the Syrian people and the person of the president. Syrians in this rhetoric were no longer even symbols of the land to protect it, but were now subjects whose submissive compliance to the masculine regime

was demanded. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the 2003, 2005, and 2007 speeches is BA's pervasive return to the language of emotional ties in describing national belonging. Familial references such as "dear brothers and sisters" were once again prominent and unremitting. In the 2003 speech before masses cheering him, Assad repeatedly emphasizes that this is a 'meeting of love' and he greets them with 'love and only greeting of love'. He even went further to say that 'I wish I can shake hands with everyone of you'. In his comments on the war against Iraq, Assad said that only through 'love we can win against those haters from inside and outside...Syria is strong through this love...this love makes Syria strong'.

In the 2005 speech before parliament he exclaimed: "My meeting with you today stems from my gratitude for this honest and loving relationship ['alaqa hamima] with you." In his 2007 speech in Deir al-Zour, BA opened with:

I salute you with the brotherhood greeting...

I cannot explain these happy moments. . .

I am between my family and my brothers.

While seeking to emphasize affective bonds as a means of generating support, this language diminishes the civic notion of national membership. It presumes an involuntary love for the nation and its leader, and implicitly excludes anyone who may not feel such intense bonds of emotional loyalty.

In the same speech of 2007, the call to an imaginary past is quickly followed by an emotive statement: "We will stay together . . . with this love we will win . . . we will win by our love for each other."

One of the most notable examples of this rhetorical shift was the 2007 campaign song "Minhibbak" (We Love You), which posits Bashar al-Assad as a masculine lover and the citizens as his devoted and feminized acolytes. As Bashar's need for abject obedience continued to grow, there was less room even for his loyal supporters to participate in the

masculine polarity; instead, they were represented as the devoted wives of the regime. The second inaugural speech (2007) is also saturated with the term 'love' as basis of the social contract that binds Syrians:

I feel love, appreciation, pride, and gratitude towards a great country and a proud people, towards my larger Syrian family who have engulfed me with a flood of noble emotions and provided me with power and will in difficult times... Your expressions of love, while taking part in the referendum for a new constitutional mandate, and your expressions of support manifested in your various activities... have been extremely significant indicators of the sublime emotional relationship that connects us in Syria.

These words succinctly combine three points that convey the outlines of primordial nationalist loyalty. First, the leader–people relationship is about maintaining personal and familial ties, based on emotional attachment and “love.” Second, these ties of love serve as a measure of the leader’s legitimacy and the consent of the governed, replacing the integrity of legal and civic processes. Third, the benefits of citizenship and belonging are predicated upon an individuals’ readiness to demonstrate unconditional love for the nation and its leader.

Instead of vowing to implement modernization and development, the second inaugural speech reduces all such trivialities to an act of “returning the people’s love”:

My vow to the people of our beloved country was to meet their expectations when they chose me, to assume this greatest of responsibilities and assimilate the ethics it involves. My vow was to return the people’s love and support by more determined work in order to realize their aspirations, to return their trust and loyalty by lifting performance and action to the status our people deserve, to return their steadfastness and resolve with more giving, and by doing my best in order to protect their interests and the interests of the country.

The aggressive suppression of independent thought and opposition that marked the end of the Damascus Spring is glossed in this speech as part of a “lively” relationship between the passionate leader and his people, one that supposedly serves to reveal their common humanity:

Sisters and brothers, during the past few years a lively relationship full of patriotic and human meanings has developed between us. Through this relationship you have known me closely in different stances and positions. It has embodied a real case of the people coming together with one of its own, one who has carried the people’s concerns, expressed their desires, and exchanged with them forms of love and belonging.

The nature of the “love” between the leader and his people is not one that tolerates disagreement and diversity, nor is it measured by civic rights and accountability. It is a construct imagined as eternal, involuntary, and sacrosanct, though in reality it fluctuates with the whims and impulses of the moment. This sentimental nationalist rhetoric tended to efface the agency of those who do not support Assad, and it was far removed from voluntary, thoughtful civic participation. Rather than a free choice to support beneficial civil institutions, belonging in the state was presented as an involuntary romantic compulsion, heedless of thought or reason, and the prototypical active citizen was always presumed to be male.

The negative contrapositive that lurks threateningly in this statement is that a failure in the national project may well be laid at the feet of degenerate and non-genuine citizens who fail to act responsibly, at least according to the dictates of the regime. Thus, the bonds of love that are overtly celebrated by the leader have a dark side, as they allow any deficiencies or setbacks to be projected onto individuals whose emotional attachment and enthusiasm for the primordial construct are deemed to be insufficient.

It is no wonder that the idea behind repeating the phrase ‘we love you’ is to institutionalise ultimate obedience and submissiveness. On the representational level, Bashar al-Assad’s cult registers the paradox between the ‘you’ and the ‘we’ – that is, the leader and the people. The rhetoric here emulates Assad’s authority and simultaneously works to represent the connection between the masculinised leader and the feminised masses.

Singing Love, Living War

The dynamics of emotional appeal continued to become more intense as protests and later warfare engulfed Syria. The regime ever more strongly co-opted bonds of personal affinity as the grounds of national belonging, substituting sentimental pleas and invocations of familial ties in place of equitable civic institutions, and characterizing the opposition as being “unloving” or “unfaithful.” Another example is a song called “*Niḥna Rijjālak Yā Bashār*” (We are Your Men, Bashar). Produced in the early years of war in 2013, the song signifies an entrenched masculinized and emotional symbolism of the nation as a space of brotherhood solidarity. The song repeatedly confirms the nation as led by men and for men only: ‘We are your men, Bashar’. It further substitutes love to the leader as a manly project stating that ‘we are the ones who loved you’. Speaking in masculine terms, love in this song does not only defines national belonging but designates boundaries of who deserve to be a legitimate citizen. Here, loving the leader and being able to sacrifice become the epitome of national existence and survival.

Another popular song *Yā sayyid al-’Uba’* (Oh Master of the Heroes) where love and blood overlaps begin as follows: “My will to you, if I am not returning, I’ll meet you in the Heaven of immortality, I will draw the borders by blood and roses.” This emotional manufacturing is used to reinforce legitimacy of what Hinnebusch calls ‘populist authoritarianism’ (2006: 269).

During war, these songs function as a mythical unity that blurs political judgment and acts as a tool of mobilization.

The cult has also become entrenched in the last decade, where Al-Assad is being depicted as a heroic leader, father, pious Muslim, well-educated doctor, symbol of resistance and Arabism, and not least a unifier of Syria's heterogeneous communities. He is described in another song "*Bidna Nhāfez*" (We want to Preserve), as *symbol of resistance, hope, the spring of humanity, beloved by millions, and master of the proud ones*. In addition, sentences like "the people chose you, the people loves you, and your people does not want anyone but you." As the regime is facing crisis of legitimacy, these songs saturated its definition of legitimate citizens with heavily romanticized rhetoric emphasizing familial bonds of love and devotion between the people and the leader.

Now as BA is running for new election, the scene of blood is back to the fore. Syrians still remember how voting with blood is normalized. We have seen people piercing their fingers to vote 'yes' in the polling stations. From love as an epitome of belonging to the nation, to sacralizing this national membership through propagating sacrifice to finally voting with blood-is just one way of how the regime manipulate obedience and subjugation.

Conclusion

This article has introduced an overview of how a concept of love has been adapted and engineered for encompassing Baathist discourse of patriotism as well as romance of both the nation and the leader. In Jonathan Heaney's evaluation of the role of emotions in framing national identities, he argued that 'via the deployment of a notion of national habitus, in which cognitive and emotional processes are intertwined, we arrive at an embodied social site in which both 'political' and 'psychological' processes intersect' (2013: 260). We need to

remember, however, as we study the role of emotional propaganda that it is not only an imposed top narrative, but what is worth investigating is the extent to which the masses has internalised this emotional narrative. This constitutes the masses as not passive recipients, yet active consumers of their own agency.

It is this history of emotional propaganda that set the stage for the opposition chants of “We don’t love you!” Such overt rejection of the Assad regime’s cynical Romantic nationalism has continued to be a touchstone of the Syrian opposition, with the same chant finding continual renewed use up to the present day. Despite this resistance, the “love and blood” rhetoric also continues to exert a hold over a significant number of Syrians, as attested by the reports of loyalists literally piercing their fingers in the polling stations to vote “yes” in blood when Assad ran for re-election in 2021. It is hard to say if such affective gestures are entirely authentic, if they emerge from a calculated intent to obtain the material benefits of loyalty, if they are a product of fear and need, or if they are simply staged. What is clear is that the co-option of emotional and romantic ties to promote relationships of subjugation is a personal and political strategy with a long and sordid history. Today this strategy continues to serve a tragic role as an ideological component in the ongoing Syrian war.

In claims of who deserves to be ‘Syrian’, love as imposed by the Baath state is used as a discursive strategy that politicizes the social dimensions of belonging. Syrians are constructed as emotional communities that required by this official narrative to meet the emotional imperatives of this given political environment. Here, love, in its constructed connotations, becomes key in understanding how state-society relations are defined, negotiated and determined in an authoritarian context such as Syria.

Taking this approach to love in the Syrian context not only revises discussions on the role of material forces in sustaining the survival of the regime but expands the scope of the role of politicizing emotions as a safeguarding tool of authoritarianism. In particular, it reconfigures the importance of love in ‘revolutionary’ regimes, for instance, in their use of propaganda, as well as in the crucial impact of personalizing love to the nation as a substitute of worshipping the leader. Understanding discursive appropriations of love in this way offers a fresh perspective into the meaning—and most importantly, the politics—of love in modern Syria and its relation to Baathism, Syrian uprising, and popular culture.

While ‘love’ as a political tool has been instrumentalized by the Baath regime to consolidate authority, Syrians now face many challenges. One of these challenges is not only reversing this imposed ‘love’ with hate or anger towards the regime but, more importantly, rationalizing nationhood and national membership through focusing on establishing civic engagement and representation.

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