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## **Sumoud-Washing: A Queer-Feminist Analysis of the Syrian and Palestinian Struggle for Liberation**

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## Introduction

This article looks at the politics of cooptation and weaponization of the Palestinian and Jawlani (Syrians in Jawlan/Golan) struggles for self-determination and liberation on the part of Syrian state officials as a way of justifying their mass human rights violations since the uprising in Syria.<sup>1</sup> We begin with the 2011 uprising because the events of the mass protests resurfaced long-buried conversations brought to light in the wake of state violence. We then identify the discursive machine the Syrian regime<sup>2</sup> manufactured as a form of whitewashing. In doing so, we reject the Syrian regime's argument that it acts as an anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist resistance force in the region. According to the regime's definition of resistance to anti-imperialism, any popular, grassroots, or out-of-state struggles against the regime in Syria are inherently imperialist and supportive or complicit with Zionism. Instead, we foreground our analysis by looking at the occupied Jawlan and the Palestinian camps in Syria during and after the Syrian uprising that redefine and claim back *sumoud* outside of the Syrian state's definition. We critique the state's claims by proposing to name such state-led propaganda as *sumoud-washing*.

We argue that *sumoud-washing* is a unique phenomenon used by post-colonial Arab nationalist discourses. We draw on historical writings to locate the beginning of the Assad regime's appropriation of regional *sumoud*, particularly in Lebanon when Hafez Assad invaded the country in 1976 to limit the rise and military control of Palestinian armed resistance in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> We show how in the case of Jawlani (Syrians in the Jawlan) and Palestinian refugees in Syria, the Assad regime warfare propaganda ironically builds on a readily available imperialist discourse produced by United States' Global War on Terror to demonize Muslims as terrorists.

We develop the concept of *sumoud-washing* by grounding it, first, within the history of the Ba'ath regime's anti-imperialist discourse after the 1967 defeat, or the Naksa, through examining the Ba'athist archives; second, through the Syrian Jawlani decolonial struggle against Israel and those who supported the Syrian uprising of 2011; and third, through the case of Palestinian camps in Syria. We do so from our positionalities in the West – Canada and in the UK/US – where many on the anti-imperialist left have discredited the uprising in Syria and whitewashed the regime's mass crimes against humanity in the name of the liberation of Palestine. Our positionality as settlers in the US and Canada requires us to develop critical sensibilities against liberal politics that disguise colonial or imperial violence in the name of social justice and decolonization. In other words, as settlers in North America and Indigenous in other settler states, our positionality is complex; yet it enables us to see how Indigenous politics offer a radical potential of imagination and reminds us how revolutionary politics always grows from the ground. Therefore, we argue that the grassroots organizing and mobilizing against the Syrian regime illuminates the efforts to oppose state-led propaganda and offer new frameworks through which we understand Syrian, Palestinian, and Syrian-

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use uprising instead of revolution as the latter is commonly associated with opposition groups and armed fractions that express right-wing militarized ideology and politics, whether inside Syria, neighbouring countries, or diaspora. By "uprising," we wish to focus on the popular and grassroots protests that are not tied to an ideology or a specific political and/or armed groups in Syria.

<sup>2</sup> We will alternate between the Syrian regime and the Assad regime.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about this see Rosemary Sayigh's work (Sayigh 1977, 2001, 1995).

Palestinian experiences. We suggest that Palestinians, Syrians and Jawlani resistance lend a “decolonial imaginary” that is informed by everyday forms of resistance and it offer alternative and life-affirming methods of revolutionary futures outside the linear trajectory of statist or official political achievements. Such imagery refuses the confinement of patriotic/terrorist binary logic often mobilized by post-colonial Arab nationalist states through their sumoud-washing. *We do so by proposing sumoud-washing as a decolonial queer feminist Syrian Palestinian framework to expose the Syrian state’s cooptation of the Palestinian struggle in its war against the people in Syria.* We also direct the readers to imagine other forms of decolonial possibilities in the region that operate outside the confinement of post-colonial Arab state nationalisms. While we do not expand on how to pave the way into these new possibilities strategically, we believe that voicing a vision is a spark that might catch flames.

Writing about Palestine and Syria in a collaborative composition can be challenging for many reasons. As Palestinian and Syrian-Palestinian writers, we have differently experienced the geopolitical contexts that this article examines. One of us has never been to Syria, and the other has never been to Palestine due to a long history of border-making, starting with the British and French colonial projects created in 1916 and later fortified by the formation of the Israeli state in 1948. Our scholarship is intricately tethered to our positionality as diasporic, exilic, and settlers on other people’s territories. We are therefore apprehensive of feminist and queer scholarship that does not acknowledge the forms of violence intrinsic to settler-colonial states. We find ourselves moving between multiple spaces and temporalities at once: our understanding of racial and political violence is informed by our experiences with racial, carceral, and extractive settler-colonialism as well as with authoritarian regimes. Being diasporic and moving between different decolonial activist circles offer us a set of tools through which we are able to provide a language to make legible how we see violence and resistance in Syria from a diasporic Palestinian perspective that is also moved by the global Indigenous and anti-racist struggles.

### **Conceptualizing Sumoud-Washing in the Context of the War on Syria**

The 2011 uprising in Syria revealed to us, Palestinians or Syrians, what was already known to many Syrians subjected to Assad’s regime. That is, the Assad regime has a long history of generating and disseminating discourses of holding ground against the Zionist enemy or of *sumoud*, Arabic for steadfastness or refusal to surrender (Meari 2014).<sup>4</sup> While our historical context is the 2011 Syrian uprising, it is by no means our point of historical departure. Indeed, the regime has sustained its authoritarian reach in the name of war with the neighbouring enemy since the aftermath of the 1967 war against Israel, the Naksa. In this piece, we critique the Syrian regime’s claims of acting as an anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist resistance force in the region by proposing to name such state-led propaganda as “*sumoud-washing*,” *the discursive speech and act that weaponizes Palestinian struggle for self-determination to justify authoritarian mass crimes against humanity in response to popular uprisings against the Syrian regime.* Supporters of the Syrian regime describe those

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the practice of sumoud, read Lena Meari’s (2014) work on Palestinian prisoners’ practices of resistance while in Israeli captivity.

who are against the regime as complicit with Israeli or Zionist ideologies (Abu-Assab & Nassr-Eddin 2019; Mogannam 2017).

At the same time, more Palestinians and Syrians have started to speak up about the accusations against them when voicing anti-Syrian regime sentiments. For example, Nour Abu-Assab and Nof Nasser-Eddin describe such accusations as reflective of “colonized subjectivities” and that “the majority of regimes in the region only exist to protect the Zionist entity” (2017). Similarly, Jennifer Mogannam (2017) discusses how anti-regime conversations are shut down, dismissed, or cut short in activists’ circles in the US.<sup>5</sup> She observed inter-generational tension between older and younger activists and organizers, where older Palestinian activists are more likely to be regime apologists and are most reluctant to express criticism of the regime. This generation lived through the Cold War where a strong Pan-Arab nationalism mobilized socialist and anti-imperialist ideologies cemented into anti-Zionist sensibilities. In contrast, the younger Palestinian generation tends to express anti-regime politics because they draw on global decolonial and indigenous struggles worldwide and are more open to envisioning new and possibilities of revolutionary imaginations (2017, 12-14). Furthermore, and through the experience of one of the authors in the grassroots activism in Yarmouk camp between 2011 and 2012, the younger Palestinian refugee generation was more directly involved in the popular protests in Syria because many were affected by the repercussions of post-colonial authoritarianism on the everyday. Whether in terms of job security or aspirations as a youth, Palestinians were not allowed to speak or organize beyond the camp, not in what is imagined as “Syrian sovereignty.” Indeed, under the so-called Syrian “anti-imperialist” state, Palestinians were only allowed to organize “within the camp.” This is a reminder of how supporters of the Syrian regime on the left in the West are dissociated from the Palestinian youth organizing on the ground in Yarmouk camp and elsewhere in Syria.

Historically speaking, the regime’s use of *sumoud* rarely translated from rhetoric into liberatory actions in Palestine or the *Jawlan* (Abu Saleh 2022). Instead, at best, it maintained the status quo of Israeli settler-colonialism and, at worst, shut down critique or resistance to the Syrian regime’s political or economic violence against populations within its borders (not only Syrian Arabs but also Syrian Kurds, Syrian Turkmans, or Palestinian and Iraqi refugees in Syria among other). We think of the term *sumoud*-washing as a useful tool to draw on the intricate forms of violence that post-colonial nation-states inflict on Indigenous communities and people subjected to settler-colonial violence, such as erasures, displacement, and dispossession. While our article is not examining the relationship between historical decolonial struggles and the formation of post-colonial states, it is worth mentioning. It is central to our argument that post-colonial nationalism, whose liberatory aspiration did not turn into a “collective endeavor” and “social and political consciousness,” leads to a dead end, as Alina Sajed (2019) notes, building on Fanon’s warning. For Syria, this dead end meant everyday authoritarian violence. Relatedly, post-colonial states might have failed in their anticolonial revolutionary goals, and most importantly, as Ellen Centime Zeleke and Arash Davari (2022)

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<sup>5</sup> In 2013, during an event of the Israeli Apartheid Week at the University of Toronto, one of the authors of this article was shut down during their keynote lecture on grassroots activism in Syria during the revolution. Palestinian supporters of the Assad regime called out accusations of complicity with imperialism and shamed the organizers for hosting an anti-Assad lecture in a Palestinian revolutionary space.

argue, there were impossible conditions that such states internalized and that became an inherent part of their structure, which became fertile ground for producing state violence. Drawing on examples from revolutions in Iran and Ethiopia, the authors remind their readers of the importance of rethinking the notion of revolution beyond the contours of Western modernity.

Our concept of sumoud-washing is inspired by queer scholarship on pinkwashing.<sup>6</sup> We ground the concept of sumoud-washing through three grassroots works that counter the Syrian state's claims of spearheading the resistance in the region. These case studies, which we elaborate on in the next section, illuminate the efforts to oppose state-led propaganda and offer new frameworks through which we understand Syrian, Palestinian, and Syrian-Palestinian experiences. We propose sumoud-washing as a concept that explains, contextualizes, and historicizes the Syrian state's appropriation of the Palestinian and Jawlani struggles against the Israeli settler-colonial state.

There are ample studies on pinkwashing in queer and feminist literature (Puar 2011, 2013; Schulman 2012; Morgensen 2013; Jackman and Upadhyay 2014; Shafie 2015; Kouri-Towe 2015, 2017; Abu Hatoum and Moussa 2018; Olwan 2019; Alqaisiya 2020).<sup>7</sup> Pinkwashing refers to how nation-states mobilize sexuality to draw attention away from colonial or imperial violence against others (Kouri-Towe, 2017). In the case of Israel, the Israeli state mobilizes the language of sexuality rights to primitivize and dehumanize Palestinians and draw attention away from the violations of Palestinian rights. Therefore, Israeli pinkwashing is a violent strategy meant to uphold state power and silence Palestinian queer subjects, who are given the right to speak only if they serve the state's interest by reproducing its homonationalist discourse (Amireh 2010).

Queer and feminist critiques of the neoliberal configuration of national modernity and progress identified states' attempts to whitewash or pinkwash their violence against Indigenous, Black, and racialized groups through promoting equality, human rights, and feminist or gay rights discourses. Queer, feminist, and critical race scholarship writings suggest that through introducing neoliberal inclusion policies and laws, governments use spectacles of inclusion to appear anti-discriminatory or defend human (queers' or women's) rights, all the while inflicting devastating violence on others in the name of the nation. Fascist and democratic regimes alike turn their "washing" mechanisms on when suitable and relevant. The US-led "War on Terror," for example, justified the occupation of other nations not only through the language of national defense against "terrorist" others but also through the language of liberating "oppressed" Muslim women from their "backward" and "patriarchal cultures" (Abu-Lughod 2013; Olwan 2013; Naber and Zaatari 2014).

Relatedly, Haneen Maikey (2013) problematized North American queer solidarity with Palestine by interrogating whether the practice of "pinkwashing" simply enhanced the politicization of the LGBTQ movements in the West or helped Palestinian queers resist the occupation. Recently, more critiques of

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<sup>6</sup> We are aware that pinkwashing as a term is derived from other forms of washing such as "white washing," which speaks to the way liberal states utilize the language of inclusion, multiculturalism, or diversity to whitewash their racist, imperialist, or colonial structures (Jackman and Upadhyay 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Queer activist groups in Palestine including [PQBDS](#), [alQaws](#), and [Aswat](#) have long described, defined, and challenged Israeli pinkwashing and homonationalism.

international queer activism against Israeli pinkwashing have surfaced. Palestinians and others addressed the problematics of singling out Palestinian queers as the only subject of legible solidarity for North American or European queers as if Palestinians at large are not subjected to settler-colonial violence. More so, the politicization of North American queer subjectivities through solidarity with Palestinian queers displaces the contexts of settler-violence from which the same queers operate, namely, Canadian or US settler colonialism (Jackman and Upadhyay 2014; Abu Hatoum and Moussa 2018). Put differently, supporters of Palestinian queers were not critical of their position and role as settlers, as if settler-colonialism in North America has been settled while in Palestine, it has not. Indeed, it is ever more crucial for a decolonial framework to keep in mind that for states like the US or Canada, spearheading the language of human rights is an integral part of their branding as democratic states, even as they engage in imperial wars, carceral politics against Black and Brown people, and the imprisonment and killing of Indigenous populations.

Understanding the danger accompanying activists' sincere attempts to expose pinkwashing is crucial to our notion of "sumoud-washing." Like pinkwashing, *sumoud-washing can turn into a myopic scope through which critiques of the Assad regime are made*. It exposes the Assad regime's everyday violence against the people in Syria by enforcing emergency laws, everyday surveillance, or the mukhabarat apparatus (Kahf 2013, 2020, 2014; Wedeen 2019; Ghazzawi 2014; alGhadbanah 2020), committing massacres as a form of governance technology (Ismail 2018) in Hama, Aleppo, Idlib, Homs, and elsewhere, and launching mass detention campaigns against dissidents and their families, including Palestinians, leftists, and Kurdish fighters from all genders. Sumoud-washing is the politics of performing solidarity with Palestinians on state media while the Syrian army is bombarding people with barrel bombs, chemical weapons, airstrikes, and other prohibited weapons (HRW 2015; Associated Press 2015; Amnesty International 2020). Other structures of violence and forms of discourse animate and sustain the regime and its image as pan-Arab and anti-imperialist. For example, while it is helpful to expose the regimes' fraught and corrupt claims to solidarity with Palestine and to hold ground against imperialist enemies, it is equally critical to expose the regime's colonial and racist violence against the people in Syria from different ethnic backgrounds and confessions. In other words, while the regime claims to be anti-imperialist, it buries conversations on decolonization and internal forms of colonization. This can be explained by placing the regime's discursive politics as stuck in the 1950s post-colonial and Arab-nationalist slogans of nation-building rather than in decolonial aspirational politics (Sajed 2019; Sajed and Seidel 2019). Indeed, most Arabic-speaking countries endorsed the Palestinian cause to gain affective (Ahmed 2004) approval from their people. As we show in this article, the Syrian regime's form of sumoud-washing seeks this shared affective approval and works to perform an image in the region and the west – but less in Syria – as the defender of pan-Arab and anti-imperialist politics. In response to the 2011 protests in Syria, the regime exceptionalized affective approval and created a polarizing turn that rendered resistance to the regime a form of sell-out to Zionist or imperialist forces.<sup>8</sup> This polarizing attempt to build on an already existing affective grammar that many in the region not only understood but feared its consequences, such as incarceration and forced disappearance (HRW 2015; Associated Press 2015; Amnesty International 2020).

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<sup>8</sup> For example, we have not seen such discourses overflow in the media in such polarizing fashion during the Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini protests or any other protests all over the MENA region.

Sumoud-washing, as opposed to pinkwashing, does not aspire to neoliberal cooption of politics. On the contrary, it aims at structuring a collective form of politics that utilizes discourses of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism instead of liberal human rights discourses, while embracing and fostering neoliberal economic policies. The mobilizing of sumoud in the Syrian regime's discourse works through polarizing opposition to the regime. Expressed differently, being in support and alliance with the regime translates to supporting the Palestinian struggle for liberation, and being against the regime and its military conduct is seen as being against the cause of liberating Palestine. This polarization risks the dysregulation and destabilization of many opposition groups, particularly those who might be critical of the Israeli state and Zionism but have been accused of complicity with the Israeli state. In fact, we argue that *sumoud-washing divorces decolonial and anti-Zionist work from anti-regime resistance*. In other words, in sumoud-washing, the liberation of Palestine and the Jawlan and solidarity with Palestinians and Jawlani-Syrians can only be "falsely" imagined *through* the support of the Syrian regime rather than in spite of it. In the following, we show how everyday revolutionary and decolonial forms of struggle in the Jawlan and amongst Palestinians in Syria are generative of sumoud politics that works outside and in opposition to the Syrian regime. We look at three case studies: first, Jawlan as a point of departure; second, the history of cooptation of the Palestinian struggle in historic Palestine and in Syria; and third, Palestinian refugee camps.

### **Sumoud-washing: Centering the Jawlan and Palestinian Camps in Syria: Jawlani Decolonial and Anti-Regime Politics**

The Jawlan is our point of departure. The liberation of the Jawlan (Golan Heights) from the Israeli settler-colonial expansion is at the heart of Syrian consciousness. However, like Palestine, the Syrian Jawlan stars in the Syrian regime's discourse of liberation even though there are no efforts on its part to take sincere steps to liberate it. On the contrary, we learn from Jawlani accounts (Abu-Saleh 2019) that they experience many forms of rejection or repulsion from Syrian state officials at the Israeli settler-colonial borders. As these accounts show, not only do Jawlanis feel neglected by the Syrian state's inactions towards liberation, but they also feel that falling under Israeli rule rendered them, in the imagination of Syrian border patrols, as Israelis or as Arabs who are prone to collaboration with the Israeli state due to annexation (ibid.).

In 1967 Israel occupied the Syrian Jawlan, the Palestinian West Bank, and the Gaza Strip (after which it was referred to as the occupied Palestinian territories – oPt). While the case of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is discussed in local, regional, and international political discourses, the occupation of the Jawlan is mostly forgotten. In the wake of the Israeli annexation of the Syrian Jawlan, nearly 147,000 Jawlanis were displaced. Of the 163 villages, only five remained all Druze. Since 1947<sup>9</sup> (Al-Hourani 2000; Sayigh 2008) and especially in 1967, Syrians in the Jawlan have collectively resisted Zionist and Israeli settler-colonial expansion, population displacement, and dispossession. Despite the many efforts to "Israelize" and coopt Jawlanis into

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<sup>9</sup> Akram Al-Hourani documents in his trilogy diary how Zionist companies attempted to buy Jawlani lands in 1947 (Al-Hourani 2000, 25).

Israeli nationalism, Syrians in the Jawlan continuously rejected and refused the colonial state's integration, interference, and cooption. Indeed, such collective practices of refusal to comply with the colonial regime have been described as operating through fugitive practices which resist the militarized and incarcerating colonial regime (Karkabi and Ibraheem 2020). It also builds on a long history of decolonial struggle since the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925-1927 (*ibid.*).

Jawlani resistance and practices of collective *sumoud* or steadfastness occurred through historical strikes, protests, and social and agricultural sustainability programs that defied dependency on the Israeli market or services (Mara'i and Halabi 1992; Mason and Dajani 2018; Mason et al. 2021). Perhaps more importantly, historical accounts and Palestinian or Jawlani personal narratives testify to a network of grassroots solidarity between Syrians in the Jawlan and Palestinians in Palestine. When Palestinians engaged in a general strike, Jawlanis joined. When Jawlanis engaged in general strikes or when Israel enforced a siege (*Al-Itihad* 1982) on the Jawlan in 1981 to force them to accept Israeli citizenship, Palestinians formed coalitions to support the besieged Jawlan with smuggled medical supplies and food, and Palestinian and Syrian prisoners in Israeli prisons were reported to form alliances (Mason and Dajani 2018; Mira'i and Halabi 1992; *Al-Itihad* 1982).

On March 25, 2011, days after the spark of the Syrian uprising, Syrians in Jawlan disseminated a statement (Ayoub 2011) of support and solidarity with the people in Syria, protesting the injustices the regime inflicted on them. In the statement, they firmly stated that they fully support those who reject the humiliation, oppression, and subordination of all authoritarian regimes in the region. They also stated that being an integral part of the Syrian people and nation, they call on rejecting all forms of violence against Syrians, be it by the Syrian regime or Israeli settler colonization. Aware of the politics that might emerge from living under colonial occupation, they rejected Israeli colonization and asserted their belonging to Syria. Insisting on belonging to Syria does not equate to belonging to a regime. Indeed, the Syrian nation or the Syrian homeland does not equate to the ruling authority. These Jawlanis forcefully refuse the narrative of colonization and authoritarianism altogether. They also assert that liberation of the Jawlan from Zionist colonization, a mission which the Syrian regime has neglected, is possible when it is in tandem with the liberation of the Syrian people from said regime. The Syrian regime has long used emergency measures and decades-long mechanisms of state-of-exception in the name of anti-imperialism, resistance (*moqawama* and *mumana'a*), and confrontation with Israel. Such measures have not only failed to liberate the colonized Jawlan but fostered an environment of corruption and decay that further oppresses Syrians.

They end their statement by rejecting the regime's killing of Syrian protestors in the name of resisting Israel. This statement, we affirm, is one of the most potent exposures of Assad's *sumoud*-washing mechanism. Jawlanis, in their support of the uprising, offer a decolonial imaginary that builds on more profound critiques of post-colonial Arab nationalism that might center on the national collective rather than the nation-state. For example, Nadeem Karkabi and Aamer Ibraheem (2020) succinctly described Jawlani's collective decolonial politics and imaginary as an endurance of statelessness that provokes a condition of "fugitivity," "which is both a political struggle that refuses to abide by colonial principles and a metaphoric practice that aims to establish existential alternatives" (2020, 7).



### Mumana'a<sup>10</sup> against Palestinians: Archives of the Syrian Ba'ath (1960-2022)

Sumoud-washing is not an *exceptional* state discourse in response to the 2011 protests; we trace its development to the 1960s and 1970s when the Ba'ath members prioritized building ties with the Arab states over supporting Palestinian armed resistance. In Ghada Talhami's book *Syria and the Palestinians: The Class of Negotiations* (2001), she cites Hafez Assad's speech in front of the party's members in September 1967 after the defeat of the Arab armies against Israel. In his speech, Assad emphasized how Syria waged all its wars since its post-colonial independence as "*a result of the Palestinian issue*" (90, emphasis ours). Expanding and following on Talhami's argument, we claim<sup>11</sup> that the aftermath of the 1967 Naksa, which resulted in Israeli colonial expansion in the region with the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip, the Syrian Jawlan, and the Egyptian Sinai Desert, marks the beginning of the Syrian Ba'athists sumoud-washing performative politics.

For example, in his statement before the party's September 1970 meeting, Hafez Assad backed the decision not to send arms to the Palestinian resistance in Irbid, Jordan, for fear of worsening relations with the Jordanian Kingdom and the Arab states (Talhami 2001, 96). In Talhami's words, Assad was afraid of preserving Jordan's military "for a confrontation with *the real enemy, the Israelis*" (96, emphasis ours). After Syria sent a tank brigade to support the Palestinians, as the minister of defense, Assad refused to provide air cover to the Syrian tank under attack from Jordan, forcing it to withdraw. This left the Palestinians unsupported on the ground, where thousands were killed by King Hussein's forces: "Assad's abandonment of the Palestinians in Jordan set a precedent that was to be repeated in subsequent acts of treachery" (Shaoul and Marsden 2000). Moreover, being a minister of defense at the time primarily affected Hafez Assad's relationship with Yasser Arafat years later when he became president (Talhami 2001, 86). This resulted in Assad imprisoning Arafat for 55 days in al-Mazzeah and other Fatah (the Palestinian National Liberation Movement) leaders. He was released on the condition that he never returns to Syria (*ibid.*, 87).

Furthermore, the aspiring Ba'ath minister Hafez Assad started to create his version of fighting Israel, or what Talhami called a "Syrian-controlled Palestinian fighting force," which resulted in the creation of the armed group Sa'iqa (*ibid.*, 91). It is important to note here that the contestation with the Palestinian resistance groups (Fatah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine PFLP, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine DFLP, and other fractions of the Palestinian Liberation Organizations – PLO) was not exclusive to Assad or Arafat; it also extended to other Ba'athists. For example, Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, head of the intelligence services in Syria following Assad's coup in 1970, similarly imprisoned PFLP's leader George Habash (*ibid.*, 92). Since the war on Palestinians in Jordan in 1970, the Syrian Ba'ath, after Hafez Assad became president,

<sup>10</sup> Mumana'a in this context means the rhetoric that claims that the Syrian regime is an anti-imperialist force in the region.

<sup>11</sup> This was also corroborated by Patrick Seale's biography of Hafez Assad (1989). As a confidant of Assad, Seale's book clearly paints a very fraught relationship between the regime's rhetorical embrace of anti-Zionism, its obsession with regional hegemony, and its commitment to Arab nationalism.

repeatedly abandoned the Palestinians in Karantina and Tal Al Zaatar camps in 1976, where the Lebanese right-wing militia killed 2000 Palestinians in alliance with Israel. Hafez Assad stood by when Palestinians were killed in Sabra and Shatila in 1982 after Israel invaded Lebanon. He also abandoned Arafat by agreeing to a truce with Israel which is still effective today.

Indeed, the Tal Al Zaatar massacre, among others, shows us why going back to the archives is an essential decolonial method to expose the Syrian regime's sumoud-washing. Tal Al Zaatar is a Palestinian camp in Lebanon in northeast Beirut. In January 1976, the camp was besieged by the Lebanese Forces and other right-wing militias as part of a broader campaign to disarm the PLO in the Lebanese north and empty the camp of Palestinian refugees. The siege escalated into a military attack against the camp, which ended in the complete eradication and destruction of the camp, leaving its Palestinian survivors displaced across Lebanon until today.

Sumoud-washing works to erase the history present in Ba'athist archives, namely their role in the systematic killings of Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, and now Syria. Identifying how sumoud-washing operated in Ba'athist history exposes Hafez Assad's abandonment of Palestinian resistance and their path to decolonial liberation. We argue that Hafez Assad's sumoud-washing in Jordan and Lebanon in the late 1970s and early 1980s – complicit in the killings against Palestinians – paved the way for his military response to any form of dissidence in Syria: against leftists, students, Kurdish people, and the Muslim Brotherhood movement. In her recent book, Salwa Ismail (2018) argues that the Hama massacre operated as a disciplinary pedagogical technology against current and future dissident movements. In this article, we argue that such disciplinary technology had already been used against Palestinians in Jordan and Lebanon before being used in Syria. Hafez Assad's sumoud-washing cannot be understood without looking at sites of violence against Palestinians in Jordan and Lebanon and without looking at sites of violence inside Syria at the same time. In other words, sumoud-washing cannot be understood without looking at domestic politics, the Syrian regime's control of freedom of speech, and systematic authoritarian violence against grassroots movements.

The Syrian Ba'ath under Hafez Assad did not only coopt the Palestinian practice and discourse of sumoud but also erased Palestinian subjectivities from sumoud itself. In other words, the Ba'ath's sumoud-washing operated without Palestinians and at the expense of Palestinians and Syrians. In this sense, the 1967 Naksa and the truce with Israel following 1982 marked the Syrian Ba'athist weaponization of the discourse of Palestinian self-determination and liberation. Talhami (2009) reminds us that Hafez Assad emerged as an Arab leader at the time when he aimed to mend Syria's regional and international isolation. Sumoud-washing, in this sense, was shaped by two simultaneous contexts: first, the aftermath of 1967 Naksa and the urge to "save Syria's face" after the defeat, and second, the political aspirations of Hafez Assad as an Arab leader in the region (Talhami 2009). In this sense, sumoud-washing is connected to the continuous erasure of two historical moments of the Ba'ath party under Hafez Assad: the first is to obscure the popular belief and memory amongst the people in Syria that Assad handed Jawlan to Israel in 1967 (Al-Hourani 2000). Second, the erasure of Assad's role in the Tal Al Zaatar massacre in 1976 reaffirmed his image as a backstabber of Palestinians (Talhami 2009).

### Either Fitna or Terrorists: Palestinians under the Syrian Mumana'a Regime

It is impossible to talk about the 2011 Syrian popular uprising without talking about the Palestinian camps' revolt that began during the early days of the uprising. Whether in the Yarmouk camp in Damascus, al Raml al Falastini camp in Latakia, Dar'a, Homs, or Al Hawl camp in the North,<sup>12</sup> Palestinian camps in Syria were generative spaces for the uprising. Al Raml al Falastini was one of the earliest areas in Syria to protest in March and was violently suppressed by the state's security forces. On March 27, 2011, the president's media advisor, Buthaina Sha'ban, said that a "few people, unfortunately, our Palestinian brothers, attacked and broke shops in Latakia and started a *Fitna* (disorder)" (Dunya-Watan 2011). She also said that one of the protestors had a gun and killed one security officer and two protestors, all of which were broadcasted on Syria TV (ibid.). The Palestinian Authority in Ramallah issued a statement of condemnation against "Arab nations using Palestinians in internal Arab matters" without naming the Syrian regime (ibid.). Ahmad Jibril, leader of the PLFP, condemned Sha'ban's statement and denied any Palestinian involvement in the protests in al Raml al Falastini. In his words: "It was the people who came from outside the area; they are from Idleb and elsewhere, but they were not Palestinian" (ibid.). As exemplified here, the Palestinian leadership in both Syria and Palestine<sup>13</sup> has further enhanced the regime's cooptation of Palestinian sumoud and its systematic marginalization of Palestinian refugees in Syria. For the regime, Palestinians in Syria are the reason behind the Dar'a protests on March 18 (ibid.). In the early weeks of the widespread protests in March of 2011, Syrian officials framed Palestinians, Iraqis, Jordanians, and Egyptians as "infiltrators" who were backed by the US and the Israeli state to overthrow the Syrian regime (Kahf 2014; alGhadbanah 2020; Ghazzawi 2017, 2021).

The Al-Yarmouk camp revolt, on the other hand, especially during the early years of the uprising before the hunger siege was enforced in late 2012 (tightened in 2013), was an essential hub for grassroots protest. Since the Khaliyat al Azmah attacks (Crisis Network), when the Free Syrian Army entered Damascus and attempted to take over Al Midan neighbourhoods, Mazzeh Vellat Shar'yeh, and other neighbourhoods, the Syrian state's tanks covered the capital and put snipers at the intersection between Yarmouk camp, Hajar al Aswad, and Tadamon. Despite the militarization and policing of the camp and surrounding neighbourhoods, the camp was a creative and resourceful hub for the Syrian aid workers, activists, and media workers affiliated with the revolution. Many fugitive Syrian activists from the Al Midan, Hajar Al Aswad, and Tadamon areas came to the camp to organize relief work and protests. They volunteered to help the internally displaced people from UNRWA schools, Falastin Hospital, and its mosques. Because Palestinian refugees in Syria are political as a way of being in the world (Said 1999), the memory of the Nakba and the aspiration for a return to Palestine animate their everyday sense of collectivity and community politics in Syria (Al-Hardan 2018).

<sup>12</sup> There are 499,189 registered refugees and 12 Palestinian refugee camps in Syria; nine are official and three are unofficial (UNRWA 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, in the past few years, we have witnessed the Palestinian Authority (PA) using the language of sumoud to foster its ever-growing authoritarian and violent security and surveillance apparatus against its people. Sumoud-washing, in the case of the PA, is a by-product of pseudo-state-building that allows the authority to practice state-sanctioned violence (through the use of police force, for example) to suppress Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories, from working toward liberation.

Palestinian activists in Al-Yarmouk camp were essential in providing aid, shelter, therapy workshops, first-hand aid, and self-care sessions with survivors. In other words, the already existing politicization among Palestinians in the camp allowed for ready action towards mobilization against the regime. In April 2015, Daesh (the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or ISIL) invaded the camp and occupied it until 2018, in what was known as the “Yarmouk battle” in the Syrian state’s official press and discourse. This was the first starvation siege to be imposed as a tactic of warfare, and such siege was justified by the global “War on Terror” discourse, reminiscent of the 2007 Lebanese army’s bombardment of Nahr el-Bared camp in Lebanon.

The Assad regime ruthlessly suppressed protests from the start of the revolution in 2011. It utilized an already existing imperialist global framework of the international “War on Terror,” which took its shape in the wake of the 2001 September 11 attacks in the US, after which the US invaded Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003. Since then, the discourse of Islamic terrorism or terrorism infused with Islamic political ideologies has become the mode of managing international politics and governing human (im)mobilities (Puar 2013; Hajjar 2006; Li 2019). We are not claiming that the Syrian government is fully joining forces with the US’ “War on Terror,” even though the regime participated in the extraordinary rendition program after 9/11,<sup>14</sup> nor does it operate through the legal tactics the US deploys to justify the use of extreme violence against Muslims worldwide. We simply gesture to the ready-made fertile ground of the “War on Terror” on which authoritarian governments, like in Syria, can enforce brutal security measures or emergency laws against all forms of protests deemed “terrorism.”

Furthermore, before the siege, Al-Yarmouk camp was perhaps the first “liberated area” in the Damascus suburbs, as it operated through a popular form of grassroots sovereignty. Such popular sovereignty at times functioned within Syrian state sovereignty and outside of it. For example, I, Razan, still remember walking around the camp in mid-2011 with the detainee Oday al Tayyem, along with his friend, a young Palestinian YouTuber, and I was amazed, as someone from Damascus city, that everyone could speak publicly about the ongoing popular protests. We reached a coffee shop, and the three of us had Nescafe 3in1 as we were discussing revolutionary organizing in central Damascus. This was not possible in my upper-middle-class Damascus neighbourhood, Tanzeem Kafarsouseh. This is not to suggest that there were no pro-state supporters among the Palestinians living in the Yarmouk camp; on the contrary, I remember one Palestinian youth who produced a short film depicting the camp’s involvement in the uprising, saying: “It is a generational thing. My parents support the regime because they have been through a lot already and learned to pick their battles. I cannot imagine a life with Assad in power. The revolution is happening in Tunisia and Egypt; why not in Syria too.” After all, Yarmouk is “the camp that refused to serve Assad in his battle to stay in power” (Halawi 2015). In agreement with Ibrahim Halawi, it is important not to separate Yarmouk’s suffering from that of Syria as it “gives Yarmouk an ‘exceptional’ status for a rather nationwide strategy of war implemented by Assad on Palestinians and Syrians indiscriminately” (ibid.) It is not a coincidence, then, that Al-Yarmouk

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the case of Syrian Canadian Maher Arar, whom the US accused of terrorism and who was sent to Syria with the CIA’s knowledge that he will be tortured by the Syrian regime. See Amnesty International (2015).

camp was the first space to be besieged to starvation by the Syrian state in its series of warfare tactics against villages, towns, and refugee camps.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that the sumoud-washing performed by the Syrian regime is a performative act that induces a cooptation of Palestinian and Jawlani struggle and self-determination. It is not a praxis of sumoud; instead, it is an appropriation of sumoud aimed at dominating and controlling its population. The premise of sumoud, as a praxis, operates through inhabiting the everyday as a site of struggle. As mentioned earlier, the praxis of sumoud can take many forms; for example, a spatial form, when navigating, crossing, or bypassing military checkpoints; a social form, when insisting on community building despite fragmentation; or a psychological form, when maintaining a strong will under interrogation.

Unlike the regime, Palestinian and Jawlani grassroots and popular movements confront the Israeli colonial state through everyday forms of sumoud. Therefore, sumoud-washing coopts Palestinian and Jawlani Indigenous movements in order first to monopolize what sumoud is and how it should look like (as in through the state, not beyond or outside of the state), and second, it is used to further promote military-carceral warfare against grassroots protesters, organizers, aid workers, and media workers. Sumoud-washing exceptionalizes the Syrian protest movements as “CIA-backed” and an “Israeli conspiracy against Palestinian sumoud.” Sumoud-washing is what military-carceral authoritarianism looks like in the name of liberating Palestine and the Jawlan. It creates a paranoid atmosphere in which protestors against the regime are deemed terrorists.

Furthermore, it generates fear of Indigenous Palestinian and Jawlani sumoud narratives that expose the regime’s cooptation of the Palestinian struggle against settler-colonialism and military-carceral authoritarianism. Indeed, in the Syrian context, it is sumoud-washing, not anti-imperialism, that explains the Syrian state’s killing of its people and other communities, including Palestinians. It is sumoud-washing that explains how Hafez’ persona as a defender of the Palestinian cause became so popular amongst diasporic non-Syrian Arabs outside the NASWA<sup>15</sup> region. Sumoud-washing, we argue, is no different from a strategy to cover crimes against Syrians and Palestinians in the name of liberating Palestine. The problem with the state’s sumoud-washing lies in its displacement and distortion of the Palestinian struggle, as it strips the people resisting on the ground of the praxis of sumoud. This also displaces Jawlani’s resistance and perseverance under Israeli settler-colonialism that attempts to separate Jawlanis from their people or families in Syria and dispossess them from their lands.

Through the examples discussed in this paper, we emphasize a fundamental difference between the liberal framework of the discourse of pinkwashing and the authoritarian notion of sumoud-washing. Sumoud-washing, as opposed to pinkwashing, does not aspire to a neoliberal cooption of politics. On the contrary, it

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<sup>15</sup> North Africa and Southwest Asia.

aims at structuring a collective form of politics that utilizes, instead of liberal human rights discourses, discourses of anti-imperialism and decolonization. The mobilizing of *sumoud* in the Syrian regime's discourse works through creating a polarizing affect. Put differently, being in support and alliance with the regime translates as being a supporter of the Palestinian struggle for liberation, and being against the regime's structure, policies, and conduct translates to being against the Palestinian cause for liberation. This polarization risks a dysregulation and destabilization of many opposition groups, particularly those who are severely critical of the Israeli state and Zionism but were depicted or framed to be made allies or complicit with the Israeli state. This is relevant to Palestinians in Syria, as shown above, and to Syrians in the *Jawlan* (and Syrian at large). Indeed, we contend that *sumoud*-washing functions at its core to divorce decolonial and anti-Zionist work from anti-regime resistance. Importantly, *Jawlani* and Palestinian resistance exposes how Syrian regime's *sumoud*-washing is an obstacle to Syrian and Palestinian liberation. In other words, in *sumoud*-washing, the liberation of Palestine and the *Jawlan* and solidarity with Palestine and with *Jawlani*-Syrians can only be achieved with the support of the Syrian regime and not despite it.

In conclusion, we argue that there are multiple ideologies and voices that were made popular after the 2011 Syrian uprising. We witnessed the voices of people who lived through the violence in many Syrian cities and villages; we also heard voices from Syrians who became refugees and Syrians in the diaspora in North America and Europe. The Syrian story of the revolution or the uprising is far from singular. Ideologies, opinions, and affective ideologies about the Syrian uprising, as expressed by other Arabs, had a wide varied range. However, amongst the cacophony of feelings, voices, ideologies, and narratives, we mostly miss the queer-feminist decolonial perspectives of lived experiences. In this article, we attend to the power of the decolonial imaginary as a queer-feminist decolonial approach that centers on the love for the land and people outside the failed and violent state nationalism, like in the case of the Syrian regime, and settler-colonial violence, like in the case of Israeli colonization of Palestine the *Jawlan*. This approach offers to see the complex affective and material ways in which grand narratives of post-colonial Arab states harm people's well-being, integrity, and sense of hope for a better future.

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