



Robust Discourse and the Politics of Legitimacy: Framing International Intervention in the Syrian Civil War, 2011–2016

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Abstract: Legitimacy is widely invoked as a master frame in international political discourse. During episodes of contention, this frame is used by opposing sides to advance competing interpretations of the same social problems. Through an analysis of elite political discourses surrounding international intervention in the Syrian Civil War, we examine what distinguishes the effectiveness of actors' framing efforts when they use a shared frame to advance conflicting agendas. We show how features of the objects (i.e., what or who) being framed shape the resonance and stability of the framing. Moreover, we show how framing objects that can be coherently interpreted in multiple ways facilitate the cultivation of discourses that are consistent despite changing social conditions and the evolution of framers' goals. We refer to this as robust discourse and elaborate on the implications of this concept.

Keywords: Framing; international politics; Syria; civil war; collective action

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As efforts to establish international laws and regulations struggle to keep pace with globalization, legitimacy has become increasingly important in international society (Beck 2011; Hurd 1999; Meyer et al. 1997). Legitimacy is rooted in widely shared systems of norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman 1995), which structure interactions and impose constraints on states and other institutions (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Wimmer 2014). Consequently, a growing collection of scholarship has turned attention to the ways in which political officials use public discourse to frame contentious activities as being legitimate (Binder and Heupal 2014; Del Rosso 2015). In this context, *legitimacy* is routinely invoked as a master frame (Snow, Vliegenthart, and Ketelaars 2018) used by opposing sides during episodes of contention to identify problems, attribute responsibility, and advocate for advantageous solutions (Clark 2005; Schoon 2016).

This raises the question: what distinguishes the effectiveness of framing efforts when the same frames are used to advance competing agendas? We explore this question through an analysis of elite political discourses regarding international intervention in the Syrian Civil War. Analyzing five years of statements by officials from the United States and Russia, along with resolutions and public statements issued by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Friends of Syria (FOS) international coalition, we examine the conditions shaping the resonance and stability (two indicators of framing effectiveness; see Snow et al. [2018] and Steinberg [1999]) of U.S. efforts to mobilize international consensus and Russian counterframing efforts, both using the legitimacy master frame. We find that competing uses of the same frame were distinguished by the objects (i.e., what or

who) being framed, and that features of the objects were instrumental in shaping the resonance and stability of framing efforts. When concrete and unambiguous objects (e.g., individual actors or specific actions) were framed as legitimate or illegitimate, the framing efforts were more easily undermined and sensitive to change despite being highly resonant. Conversely, when the same frame was used to encode objects that were consistently and coherently interpretable in different ways (i.e., multivocal), counterframing efforts were robust to changes in both the opportunity structure and in the framer's agenda.

In addition to contributing to a growing collection of sociological scholarship applying insights from research on collective action and social movements to the study of the 2011 Arab uprisings and their aftermath (Alimi 2016; Beck 2014; Goldstone 2011; Moss 2016), our findings have theoretical implications for the study of framing. Research on collective action framing routinely treats the problems or issues being framed as components of the frames themselves (Benford and Snow 2000; Ketelaars 2016). Our findings highlight the importance of treating frames and the objects being framed as theoretically and analytically distinct, showing how the specificity or multivocality of the object can influence the resonance and stability of framing strategies. These findings contribute new insights to long-unresolved efforts to account for the fact that opposing actors often rely on shared frames to offer competing interpretations of events, and to explain why divergent uses of the same frame vary in effectiveness (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Luker 1984; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Steinberg 1999; Tarrow 1994). Based on our findings, we argue that the capacity to meaningfully reinterpret the object being framed across space and time produces *robust discourse*, and we build on Padgett and Ansell's (1993) influential conceptualization of robust action to elaborate the substantive and theoretical implications of robust discourse.

Framing, Counterframing, and the Objects in the Frame

A frame is an "interpretive schemata that signifies and condenses 'the world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action..." (Snow and Benford 1992:137). More broadly, master frames perform the same functions, but are widely shared by diverse actors during specific periods in time (Snow et al. 2018). Framing refers to processes of interpretation and meaning construction that employ frames or master frames. These processes can and often are contested.

Although scholars have long accounted for the contentious dynamics of framing processes by examining efforts to rebut or neutralize the framing advanced by an opposing party in a process referred to as counterframing (Benford and Snow 2000), much of the research in this area has focused on how differences between the frames themselves influence the relative effectiveness of framing and counterframing strategies (for a review, see Benford and Snow [2000]). Yet multiple scholars have noted that such ideational conflicts routinely revolve around shared frames that use the same symbols and signifiers (Luker 1984; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Steinberg 1999; Tarrow 1994). For example, Tarrow (1994:113) observes how protestors opposing the Gulf War engaged in a "self-conscious strategy... to extend

consensual symbols into oppositional meanings.” Similarly, in her study of pro-choice and pro-life movements, Luker (1984) shows that activists relied on the same “civil rights” frame despite advancing antipodal agendas. The use of shared frames in pursuit of competing ends has also been emphasized by scholars, illustrating the distinction between frames and ideology (Oliver and Johnston 2000) as well as highlighting the dialogic nature of framing processes (Steinberg 1999).

Despite the prevalence of shared frames being used in pursuit of competing ends, the implications of this phenomenon for understanding the effectiveness of collective action framing has received little attention. The effectiveness of framing strategies is typically equated with resonance (i.e., whether a frame strikes a responsive chord with a target audience) (Snow et al. 2018). However, effectiveness is also influenced by the stability, or staying power, of framing strategies.¹ In the process of meaning construction and interpretation, instability can undermine the narrative fidelity and potency of framing (Steinberg 1998) because changing interpretations of a problem weaken efforts to advance a particular solution (Mills 1940; Schimmelfennig 2001). Importantly, the need for stability and narrative fidelity can come into conflict with the need for flexibility and adaptation as circumstances change and framers’ proximate goals evolve.

Although research has shown that framing effectiveness results from alignment between frames and broader cultural contexts (McCammon et al. 2007), media processes (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Tarrow 1994), or political opportunity structures (Cress and Snow 2000; Gamson and Meyer 1996), these explanations imply that differences in the effectiveness of framing strategies result from differences in the frames employed. However, to understand what differentiates the resonance or stability of a single frame when it is used to advance competing interpretations of a social problem requires looking beyond the frame itself. As Tarrow (1994) notes, the motivation for actors to invoke consensual symbols despite advancing competing agendas is that those symbols are already generally accessible and interpretable. Regarding discourses of legitimacy in international politics (the focus of our research) more specifically, Clark (2005:191) writes that, “legitimacy has historically been viewed as implying a measure of social consensus.” Thus, if the primary benefit of using the same frames to advance conflicting interpretations of a social situation is to imply consensus via the ideational content of the frame, then what distinguishes the effectiveness of these frames?

The Objects in the Frame

Early research by Snow, Benford, Gamson, and their collaborators provides potentially the most relevant insights for answering this question via their treatments of the relationship between frames and the social world that frames are used to interpret (Gamson 1988; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Snow and Benford 1988, 1992). As Gamson and Modigliani (1989:4) note, “Frames should not be confused with positions for or against some policy measure.” Instead, framing provides a way of focusing attention on particular aspects of a social situation.

In detailing how frames are transformed from general schemata of interpretation to instruments of collective action, Snow and Benford (1988) identify three core tasks

of collective action framing: diagnosis, prognosis, and motivation. Diagnosis and prognosis are central to consensus mobilization and involve problem identification, problem attribution, and the articulation of strategies for remediation. Motivational framing functions as a prod to action.

In their initial elaboration of these tasks, Snow and Benford (1988) point to the importance of what is specifically being framed in transforming an interpretive frame into a collective action frame. They illustrate this in the context of the peace movement when they note that “there is relatively little dispute regarding the nuclear threat... There is far less agreement, however, with respect to the factors underlying this threat” (Snow and Benford 1988:200). They go on to explain that each facet of framing is “interconnected such that each successive dimension is constrained by the preceding ones” (Snow and Benford 1988:202). Thus, the aspect of the situation identified as being problematic (e.g., whether frames are used to punctuate and encode technological developments or political factors pertaining to nuclear threat) shapes efforts to attribute responsibility (diagnosis), identify solutions (prognosis), and motivate action.

This interconnectedness has important implications for understanding what distinguishes the resonance and stability of competing uses of a single frame. The overarching goals of diagnostic and prognostic framing are to build consensus around a particular interpretation of events, clearly articulating who is responsible and what should be done (Snow et al. 2018). In this context, effective framing must include both diagnosis and prognosis, and the most widely resonant diagnostic and prognostic framing are considered to be the most effective. Actors face the challenge of retaining resonance as they move through the progressively more specific framing tasks. Moreover, some diagnoses fail to translate into credible prognoses, thereby undermining the stability or staying power of the framing strategy. Thus, the resonance and stability of diagnostic and prognostic framing will be shaped by the extent to which the focal object aligns with the object identified in the preceding task, remains resonant with the target audience, and remains empirically credible.

Although foundational scholarship on framing clearly emphasizes this emergent and interactive dynamic in framing processes (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; Gamson 1988; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982), the distinction between framing (the process) and frames (the schemata of interpretation) has undergone a great deal of conceptual slippage in subsequent research (see Oliver and Johnston [2000] for a more elaborated discussion). As a result, the objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action that are brought into frame have been explicitly conceptualized as features of the frames themselves (Benford and Snow 2000:614).

Yet, examining the relationships between frames and the objects being framed provides leverage for understanding how framing strategies differ in effectiveness, even when the same frames are chosen to advance conflicting agendas. A master frame, such as the *injustice* frame (Gamson et al. 1982), can yield very different interpretations of a given outcome depending on whether the outcome itself is framed as unjust or the process that led to the outcome is framed as unjust. Such differences in what is being framed can influence the resonance of diagnostic framing (Ketelaars 2016) and, subsequently, the process of translating diagnosis

into prognosis or motivation (Snow and Benford 1988). Moreover, the stability of a framing strategy may have as much to do with changes in the objects being framed as with changes in the broader political opportunity structure (Gamson and Meyer 1996), media environment (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), or cultural context (McCammon et al. 2007).

As we show through our analyses below, features of the objects being framed do in fact influence the resonance and stability of competing uses of the same frames. In addition to influencing established indicators of framing effectiveness, we also find that features of the object being framed can create distinct opportunities in the process of meaning construction. Specifically, when the object being framed is generally applicable and multivocal, it creates an opportunity for what we refer to as *robust discourse*: discourse that can convey multiple meanings and align with evolving agendas without compromising narrative fidelity. As we discuss below, robust discourse helps to resolve the tension between narrative fidelity and adaptability.

The Syrian Civil War

On March 15, 2011, the Syrian military responded to demonstrations in southern Syria with violent repression. The government's use of force motivated nationwide protests to demand the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad. Refusing to resign, Assad intensified the military response to protests, killing hundreds and sweeping the country into the 2011 revolutionary wave in the Middle East (Beck 2014). The actions of the Assad regime prompted international sanctions, and by August 2011, the United States and other governments were echoing the activists' assertions that Assad had lost legitimacy and must step down.

During the following six months, national and international responses to the conflict intensified. In October 2011, members of the Syrian opposition formally established the Syrian National Council with the stated goal of overthrowing the Assad regime. Within months, the al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, established itself in Syria and joined the fight against the Assad regime, gaining support from moderate opposition forces. At the international level, Russia and China twice vetoed UNSC resolutions condemning the Syrian government and supporting international sanctions. Following the second veto, a group of nations announced the formation of the Friends of Syria (FOS) group. Inspired by the Friends of New Libya coalition that had overthrown Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya, the FOS aimed to mobilize broad support for a coordinated international response to the Syrian Civil War (Lund 2017).

As the conflict continued to escalate, diplomatic tensions grew between countries aligned with the Assad regime (Russia, China, and Iran) and those advocating for its removal (United States, European Union [EU] countries, Arab League countries, Turkey, and others). The United States, EU, and Turkey refrained from direct military intervention throughout 2011 and much of 2012. However, in August 2012, President Barack Obama said that the United States would intervene if the Syrian government deployed chemical weapons (Al Jazeera 2014).

In response to international concerns that the Syrian National Council was not broadly representative of the Syrian opposition, in November 2012, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (also referred to as the Syrian National Coalition) was formed to pave the way for diplomatic recognition and gain access to foreign aid, subsuming the Syrian National Council (MacFarquhar and Droubi 2012). The Syrian National Coalition was intended to “become the conduit for all financial and possibly military aid, administer areas controlled by rebel forces, and plan for a post-Assad transition” (British Broadcasting Corporation 2013). In response to this development, the United States formally recognized the National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and the FOS subsequently adopted the framing previously advanced by the United States that Assad had lost legitimacy while also recognizing the Syrian National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people

In 2013, two events further altered the trajectory of the conflict. In April, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and in June, the United States disclosed evidence that Syrian government forces had used chemical weapons against the opposition. The latter event prompted President Obama to authorize sending weapons to Syrian rebels and to advocate for targeted military intervention. In response, Russia coordinated an agreement with the Assad regime to move all of Syria’s chemical weapons under international control (Gordon 2013). In September 2014, the United States began airstrikes against ISIS, shifting focus toward combatting the radical Islamist group, and on September 30, 2015, Russia began airstrikes in Syria. Russia reported that they were only targeting ISIS, but these claims were contested by the United States and opposition rebels on the ground who said that Russia was targeting anti-Assad forces (Osborn and Stewart 2015). In the wake of these airstrikes, the United States and Russia agreed to schedule talks to ensure that Russian and Western jets did not accidentally clash.

As international military operations expanded, Russia and the United States agreed to a joint effort to advance stalled peace talks. The talks resulted in a plan that affirmed a commitment to Syrian-led political transition, agreed to support a nationwide ceasefire, reaffirmed a commitment to defeat ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and increased international involvement in the region. However, the United States and Russia remained at odds over whether Bashar al-Assad or members of his regime would have any role in the transition. During this time, the Syrian National Coalition faced growing criticism that it did not represent the full range of opposition groups (Khatib 2014) and failed to provide credible political leadership (Sayigh 2014). In 2015, the United States “quietly dropped its longstanding demand that President Bashar al-Assad step down as a part of any settlement” (Tisdall 2015), providing Russia a major diplomatic and symbolic victory.

Data and Analytic Approach

Political elites routinely framed aspects of the Syrian Civil War as legitimate or illegitimate in an effort to advance conflicting agendas and influence consensus regarding international responses to the Syrian Civil War. Our methods were struc-

tured in an effort to identify the factors influencing the resonance and stability of the United States' and Russia's uses of legitimacy for diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and counterframing during the first five years of the Syrian Civil War. As we detail below, resonance is indicated by the extent to which particular framing strategies are endorsed by other stakeholders. Stability is indicated by the extent to which the same frame and object are employed in conjunction throughout the time period under examination. Additionally, our elaboration of robust discourse is based on an examination of how the objects being framed are employed and to what ends.

Because explicit references to legitimacy are fairly common in international political discourse, it was necessary to broadly examine what distinguished discourses invoking legitimacy as a collective action frame versus discourses invoking legitimacy as a general schema of interpretation. To do this, we compiled for analysis the 16 resolutions issued by the UNSC in response to the Syrian Civil War and the United Nations (UN)-sponsored Geneva Communiqué. Within the UNSC, each of the five permanent members (Russia, China, United States, United Kingdom, and France) can unilaterally veto any resolution. Because the permanent members were divided over who they supported in the Syrian Civil War, the language of these resolutions was necessarily neutral with regards to any contentious issues. In this way, the UNSC resolutions provide a baseline to assess whether the meaning or ideational content communicated via references to legitimacy in this context differed from efforts to advance particular agendas. The broader but less-structured Geneva Communiqué provide a similar baseline for comparison.

To examine competing uses of the legitimacy master frame by dominant actors engaged in framing and counterframing, we compiled five years of public statements made by representatives of the United States and Russia. We began by using LexisNexis to search for instances in which legitimacy, illegitimacy, or any of their derivatives (i.e., legitimate, legitimation, etc.) were used in reference to the Syrian Civil War. The fact that these specific words are so commonly used in routine discourse allowed us to identify efforts to punctuate and encode specific aspects of social situations as "legitimate" or "illegitimate" via this common language. Comparison with the UN-sanctioned statements facilitated our efforts to identify when legitimacy was being invoked for the purposes of framing.

Following previous research using media accounts to identify public statements (Kadivar 2013), we reviewed the titles and introductions of all articles for references to claims-making by political elites ("Syria: Assad must resign, says Obama", McGreal and Chulov 2011). In instances in which the titles or introductions were unclear, we reviewed the entire article for direct references to elite discourse. We then searched official state archives to compile complete text of truncated statements and further identify relevant statements. Although many of the public statements archived by the Russian government are provided with English translations, this was not always the case. In instances in which we were unable to find complete texts with official English-language translations, we cross-referenced existing news reports and transcripts of interviews to ensure reliability. Through this process, we identified 146 statements by U.S. officials and 116 by Russian officials for analysis,

with these statements invoking legitimacy or illegitimacy to frame aspects of the Syrian Civil War 238 and 220 times, respectively.

In light of the fact that Russia had few allies supporting its position on Syria and was primarily engaged in countering U.S.-led efforts rather than mobilizing consensus around their own position, our analysis of resonance centered on the framing employed by the United States as it worked to mobilize broad international consensus. We compared statements and resolutions issued by the FOS with those issued by the United States. As an early but tentative advocate for removing Bashar al-Assad from power, the United States was actively engaged in efforts to mobilize consensus and establish a broad coalition prior to any intervention (Lund 2017). The FOS was founded as a voluntary, nonregional group of nations and nongovernmental organizations that advocated a proactive response to the Syrian Civil War by the international community. At its peak, the FOS included nearly two-thirds of all UN member states. The FOS issued statements seven times from 2011 to 2016, with the number of participating nations ranging from 116 at its peak in late 2012 to 11 nations by 2014. The content and wording of these statements were carefully negotiated by the signatories for each statement, and each signatory had the opportunity to decide (and influence) whether the language was resonant to them and to the people or populations they represented. Thus, FOS statements thus allow us to examine (1) to what extent the framing used by the United States was subsequently adopted by a broad coalition of nations in the international community, (2) when the framing used by the United States was adopted by the FOS, and (3) the number of countries officially endorsing that framing.

To analyze these data, we developed an initial coding instrument and then used qualitative data analysis software to conduct a preliminary analysis on a stratified random sample of 75 documents (15 per year) that included statements by officials from the United States, United Kingdom, Turkey, and Russia. Our coding instrument accounted for who was speaking and their official position; what problems were identified and how responsibility was assigned (diagnostic framing); and what solutions, strategies, tactics, and targets were identified (prognostic framing). This allowed us to identify what was being framed as legitimate or illegitimate and how those objects were reflected in subsequent framing efforts. Based on this preliminary analysis, we further refined our coding instrument for use in our full analysis of the materials collected for the United States and Russia. In total, we manually coded 404 documents.²

Throughout the coding process, the two authors met regularly to discuss themes that emerged and re-evaluate our coding scheme. The final codes were established through an iterative and inductive process that was intended to achieve the maximum level of generalizability while retaining theoretically and substantively relevant differences. For example, in establishing codes for the objects being framed, we focused on substantive differences that pertained to the core tasks of collective action framing. To illustrate, although references to the Syrian people were common discourses from all sources, we found that references to the desires and ambitions of the Syrian people (coded as *Sentiments*) implied very different diagnosis than affirming the legitimacy of the Syrian peoples' fight against the Assad regime (coded as *Actions*). After final codes were established, the first listed author returned to

the data to confirm that all codes had been applied consistently. This multistage approach follows recommended best practices (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 2008), and the use of collaborative coding built reality checks into our analytic strategy, as recommended by Firebaugh (2008).

Findings

International Intervention in the Syrian Civil War

As the conflict in Syria escalated through the spring and early summer of 2011, activists and members of the opposition increasingly worked to frame President Bashar al-Assad as illegitimate and called on political officials to follow suit (Dabashi et al. 2011). In spite of signaling their agreement that President Assad's leadership was no longer viable, the United States and allied governments were initially more tentative in their statements and refrained from invoking legitimacy when interpreting the events.

However, U.S. discourse changed in July 2011. On July 12, the U.S. Embassy in Damascus was attacked with no intervention by the Assad regime. In response, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a statement on July 13 saying, "From our perspective, [Bashar al-Assad] has lost legitimacy" (Clinton 2011). This was the first statement by the United States explicitly using "legitimacy" to frame the situation in Syria, attributing blame to Bashar al-Assad. Beyond representing a substantive shift in the discourse of the United States, this marked a watershed moment internationally as questions of legitimacy emerged as a focal point in international efforts to frame events in Syria and coordinate international responses.

To assess what distinguished discourses that invoke legitimacy as a collective action frame versus as a more generalized schema of interpretation (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Snow and Benford 1988), we compared the uses of legitimacy in statements issued by the FOS with UN-sponsored statements that were approved by countries supporting competing sides in the civil war. Across the 16 UNSC resolutions, the Geneva Communiqué, and 8 FOS statements, we identified no differences in how legitimacy was defined. However, we did find important differences in what was framed.

Table 1 presents the objects that were identified as legitimate or illegitimate in these 25 documents, the frequency with which each group referenced each object, examples of discourse, and a list of the resolutions or statements in which the discourse appears. Every reference to legitimacy in our baseline set of texts (the UN-sanctioned documents) focuses on the sentiments of the Syrian people (i.e., legitimate aspirations or legitimate concerns). Consistent with the assumption that joint resolutions sponsored by the UN would represent neutral language, these affirmations of the Syrian people's desires and aspirations did not advance a particular agenda and did not distinguish between factions of the Syrian people. Instead, they supported the widely accepted commitment to a locally led process of conflict resolution.

Unlike UN-sanctioned documents, the FOS invoked legitimacy to selectively encode and punctuate objects in a way that actively framed events by identifying

Table 1: Objects framed in collective international statements and resolutions regarding the Syrian Civil War

	Actions	Actor	Needs	Process	Rights	Sentiments
Friends of Syria	2	6	1	3	1	6
Geneva Communiqué	0	0	0	0	0	3
UN Security Council	0	0	0	0	0	9
Example of discourse	“The participants expressed their support for legitimate measures taken by the Syrian population to protect themselves.”	“Participants acknowledged the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people...”	“Participants recognized the legitimate need for the Syrian people to defend themselves against the violent and brutal campaign of Al Assad regime.”	“Participants confirmed the necessity of holding accountable perpetrators of crimes under legitimate legal proceedings...”	“Participants paid tribute to the steadfastness of the Syrian people and their determination to pursue their legitimate rights...”	“The parties must be prepared to put forward effective interlocutors to work expeditiously towards a Syrian-led settlement that meets the legitimate aspirations of the people.”
Sources each object appears in:	FOS Istanbul Conference, Paris Conference.	FOS Istanbul Conference, Marrakech Conference, Rome Conference, Tunis Conference.	FOS Marrakech Conference.	FOS London Conference, Marrakech Conference, Paris Conference.	FOS Marrakech Conference.	Geneva Communiqué; UN Security Council Resolutions 2118, 2139, 2165, 2191, 2254, and 2042; FOS Amman Conference, Istanbul Conference, Marrakech Conference, Tunis Conference.

Notes: FOS, Friends of Syria; UN, United Nations.

problems, attributing responsibility, and identifying solutions. From the outset, the FOS framed the problem in terms of the Assad regime's actions, citing widespread and systematic human rights violations. Moreover, the Syrian National Council was recognized as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people, going beyond the language presented in the UNSC resolutions to signal that the Assad regime was not the arbiter of the Syrian people's legitimate desires and aspirations.

Nevertheless, the first two FOS statements, issued in February and May of 2012, continued to call on the Assad regime to take an active role in reversing the problem. A key issue faced by the states seeking to stem the conflict in Syria was that simply forcing Assad out risked creating a power vacuum that could further undermine the stability of the region (Lund 2017). Consistent with this concern, the FOS did not adopt the U.S. framing that Bashar al-Assad had lost all legitimacy until a credible strategy for remediation (i.e., prognostic framing) could be identified that would prevent this from happening.

The introduction of such concrete prognostic framing occurred on December 11, 2012, when President Obama announced that the United States now recognized the Syrian National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Framing the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people identified them as the entity that would fill the void left by Assad. This prognostic framing aligned with the diagnostic framing, which identified violence by the Syrian regime as the problem and attributing responsibility to Assad himself.

This development in the U.S. framing was driven by the formation of the Syrian National Coalition (Lund 2017). Although the United States and FOS had identified the Syrian National Council as one of the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people in early 2012, the United States had effectively communicated to the Council that exclusive recognition was contingent on their ability to unify the opposition factions. The importance of the object being framed in the development of the U.S. prognostic framing was made explicit in the Obama administration's recognition of the Syrian National Coalition, which attributed this development to features of the Coalition itself:

"We've made a decision that the Syrian Opposition Coalition is now inclusive enough, is reflective and representative enough of the Syrian population that we consider them the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime..." (Spetalnick 2012).

The day after the United States announced its recognition of the Syrian National Coalition, the FOS issued the final statement from its third meeting in Marrakech. At this meeting, the group formally adopted the diagnostic framing that had been advanced by the United States for more than a year that "Bashar Al Assad has lost legitimacy to govern Syria." Moreover, along with the United States, the FOS recognized the Syrian National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

The FOS's statement following the Marrakech meeting highlights the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to mobilize consensus. As detailed above, success in consensus mobilization is contingent on the presence of both diagnostic and prognostic framing and on the resonance of these statements with the target audience. Absent a mandate from the UNSC, the United States and others sought to build international

consensus through the FOS to bolster efforts aimed at mobilizing coordinated action in Syria. Not only did the U.S. framing develop from diagnosis to prognosis, but the acceptance of this framing by approximately 60 percent of all UN member states indicates the global scope of resonance that this framing had.

Although the formation of the Syrian National Coalition increased the resonance of international consensus mobilization, the National Coalition itself subsequently undermined this framing. Responses by some Syrian opposition forces to the U.S. effort to distinguish between the legitimate opposition and illegitimate (i.e., Islamist) forces—as reflected in their designating Jabhat al-Nusra as a Foreign Terrorist Organization—highlighted important divisions among members of the opposition. The National Coalition struggled with internal schisms, resulting in the resignation of its first chairman just months after the coalition's formation (Sayigh 2013). In January 2014, the Syrian National Council—which remained the largest bloc in the National Coalition—withdrawn from the National Coalition (Sayigh 2014), and the National Coalition faced growing criticism for not representing the full range of opposition groups (Khatib 2014; Sayigh 2014). By 2015, factions within the opposition had multiplied to a point where there was little basis for common action (Jansen 2015; Lund 2017).

The United States maintained its diagnostic framing centered on Assad's illegitimacy through 2015, but the prognostic framing that focused on a legitimate alternative to Bashar al-Assad faded from U.S. discourse. The last instance we were able to identify of a U.S. official framing the National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people took place in May 2014. As this framing lost credibility, efforts aimed both at mobilizing international consensus around a viable alternative to Assad and at coordinating a broadly unified international response to the Assad regime similarly faded. Divisions within the National Coalition and questions surrounding the nature of the moderate opposition's relationship to Jabhat al-Nusra made many countries reluctant to work through the National Coalition when providing military aid to rebels, fearing that those weapons might be channeled to the al-Qaeda affiliate. Consequently, although recognizing the National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people had been intended to facilitate coordinated action within the international community, international support largely circumvented the National Coalition as individual governments instead supported opposition groups that best aligned with their interests (Black 2015; Lund 2017). Eleven governments continued to meet under the moniker of the FOS, but their numbers reflect the deterioration of the consensus that had been built around the framing adopted at the meeting in Marrakech. By 2015, the president of the Syrian National Coalition, Khaled Khoja, publicly called U.S. plans to assist the National Coalition a "joke" and referred to the support from the FOS as "a pact of cardboard," comparing it unfavorably to the "pact of steel" that, he said, characterized the relationship between Russia and the Assad regime (Black 2015).

During this time, Russian forces were able to help militarily secure the Assad regime's position. In conjunction with the failure of the international anti-Assad coalition to translate consensus mobilization into a coordinated response, the power dynamics on the ground in Syria effectively reversed. As noted above, finding itself

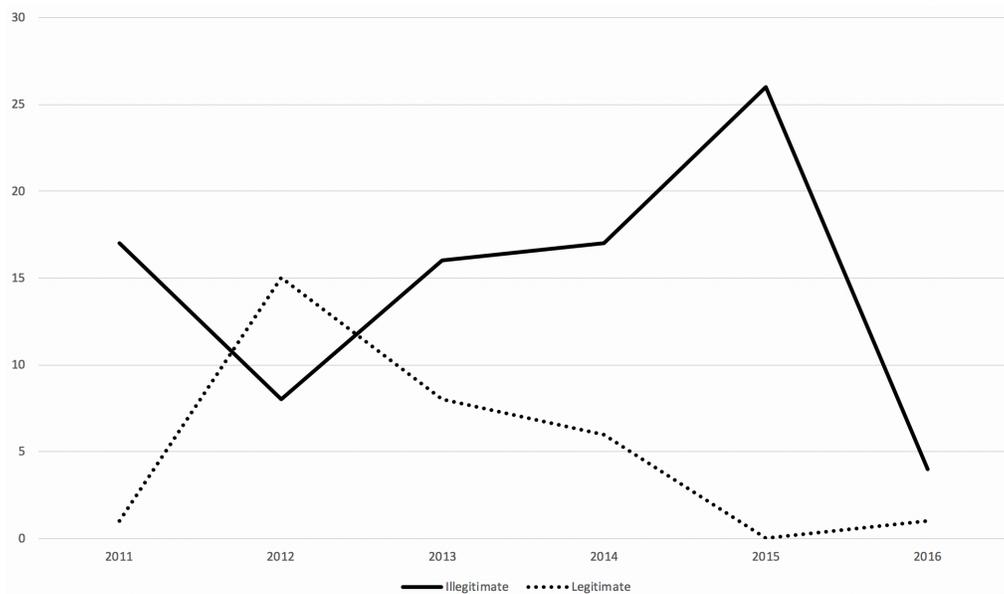


Figure 1: U.S. references to the legitimacy and illegitimacy of actors.

in a diplomatically weakened position, the United States and allies backed away from the position that Assad must go, abandoning the last remaining component of its framing strategy (Tisdall 2015). This instability is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the change in the U.S. discourses of legitimacy and illegitimacy of actors (i.e., the National Coalition and Bashar al-Assad) during the first five years of the conflict.

Counterframing

Although Russia refrained from military intervention in Syria until 2015, they blocked UNSC resolutions demanding Bashar al-Assad step down and worked to prevent international interventions that would benefit the opposition. Central to Russia's efforts was an active process of counterframing. With its military capabilities and permanent position on the UNSC, Russia was capable of advancing their agenda via material and institutional means. However, this required walking a fine line to avoid becoming an international pariah or facing sanctions for supporting the

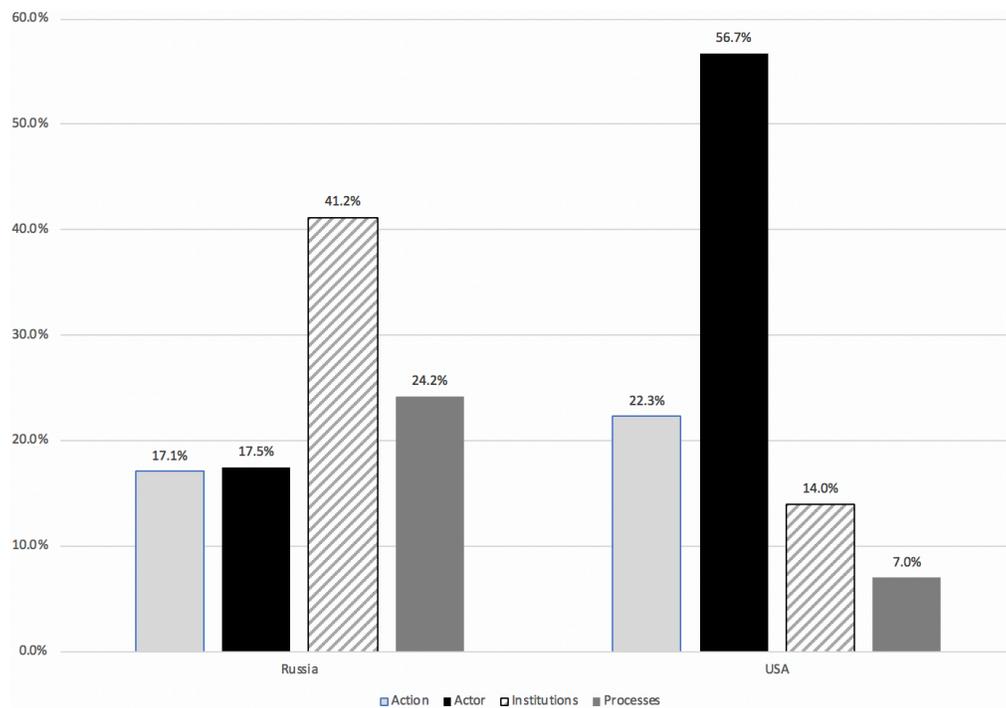


Figure 2: Proportion of references to objects framed, by country.

Assad regime (Kuchins 2013). Thus, Russia faced the dual challenge of appearing impartial and advancing their own interests (Padgett and Ansell 1993).

Focusing on the legitimacy of processes and institutions emerged as a critical point of distinction between the United States' and Russia's uses of the legitimacy master frame. Figure 2 compares the proportion of U.S. and Russian discourses that refer to the four most common objects identified in our analysis during the first five years of the conflict. Consistent with our discussion above, 79 percent of all references to legitimacy made by U.S. officials focused on specific actors or actions. In contrast, approximately two-thirds of all Russian references to legitimacy focused on the legitimacy of key processes and institutions. The importance of this pattern is reflected in how Russian discourse evolved over time. As Russia's involvement increased through the course of the conflict, their focus on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of institutions and processes grew disproportionately relative to the other four most commonly identified objects (see Figure 3).

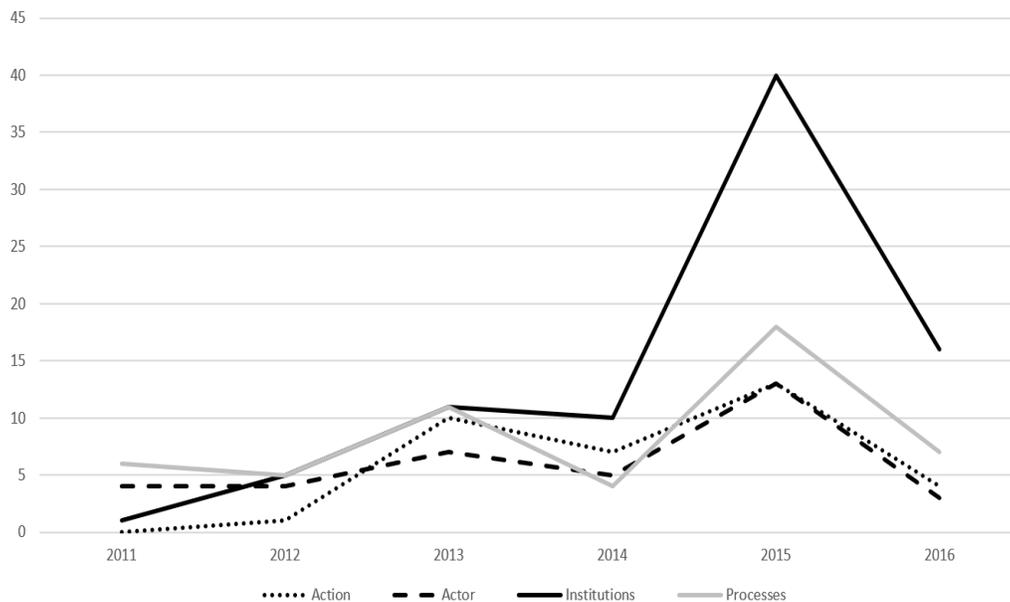


Figure 3: Russian references to the four most common objects framed.

Rather than directly contradicting U.S. framing, which attributed responsibility to Assad, Russian counterframing consistently highlighted how the U.S. framing efforts contradicted agreed-upon procedures or lacked the approval of widely accepted institutions, such as the UN. This is pointedly illustrated by Russia's responses to growing international framing of the opposition as legitimate. Throughout 2011 and 2012, we found no statements by Russia arguing that the National Council or the National Coalition was illegitimate. However, Russian officials repeatedly addressed the legitimacy of international efforts to end the conflict. Responding to the U.S. recognition of the National Coalition as the sole legitimate representatives of the Syrian people, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in 2012:

"I learned with some surprise that the United States through its President acknowledged the [Syrian National Coalition] as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. This is contrary to the agreements set forth in the Geneva communiqué, which expects the start of the

dialogue between the representatives of Syrians appointed by the government, on the one hand, and the opposition - on the other" (Lavrov 2012).

Without directly challenging the assertion that the National Coalition had legitimacy, Lavrov questioned the U.S. commitment to the agreed-upon peace process. Russian officials similarly emphasized the centrality of the UN in determining the legitimacy of the international intervention. As Russian President Vladimir Putin said in September 2015:

"...in my opinion, provision of military support to illegal structures runs counter to the principles of modern international law and the United Nations Charter. We have been providing assistance to legitimate government entities only" (Putin 2015).

When Russian officials challenged the legitimacy of the opposition, their discourses mirrored the UNSC resolutions' and Geneva Communique's acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the Syrian people's aspirations. Russian representatives consistently reiterated their focus on the political process and affirmed their stance that political change should come from within and not be imposed by external powers. As Ambassador Alexander Zasytkin said:

"Before the conflict there was a normal country with a legitimate government and an army and all the technical and military cooperation that comes with it. That is not a strange phenomenon. Now, that government is being countered by a force that we do not consider legitimate, that is why we should give Syrians the right to decide themselves through elections, and not the international community" (reported in Williams 2013).

Russia's focus on the legitimacy of specific processes allowed them to reaffirm their positions regarding the Assad regime and the National Coalition as their military strategy evolved. This is reflected in Russia's justification for direct military intervention, which relied on the same framing strategy. As Foreign Minister Lavrov elaborated:

"When we started the air operation in Syria at President al-Assad's request, we informed Washington that, although the United States-led coalition has been operating in Syria without the approval of the legitimate government or a UN Security Council mandate (unlike in Iraq, where they have this approval)... we were willing to coordinate our efforts with them in the interest of fighting terrorism" (Lavrov 2015a).

Even as the Assad regime's use of force escalated and Russian officials distanced themselves from Assad himself, they were able to maintain the same core framing strategy. As Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev stated in a 2015 interview:

"Russia, the United States, and all other states that have a stake in seeing peace in this region and in Syria, and a strong government, too, should be discussing precisely political issues... It does not really matter who

will be at the helm. We don't want ISIS to run Syria, do we? It should be a civilised and legitimate government. This is what we need to discuss... It is up to the Syrian people to decide who will be the head of Syria. At the moment, we operate on the premise that al-Assad is the legitimate president" (translation by Devitt 2015).

By framing the Syrian government as a legitimate institution, Medvedev created distance between Russia and Assad while continuing to argue that a stable government in the region was critical to countering ISIS. Although Medvedev identified Assad as the legitimate president, he refrained from direct evaluations of Assad as an individual and instead reiterated the legitimacy of his institutional position. Medvedev explicitly acknowledged that Assad may not hold that position indefinitely. Similarly, a spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry stated on March 27, 2016, that, "We are supporting not Assad [himself]... We have backed the maintenance of the legitimate government" (Sputnik News 2016).

By focusing primarily on the legitimacy of key processes and institutions rather than key actors, Russia was also able to apply the same framing strategy in debates over who should be included in peace negotiations. The Russian news agency Interfax quoted a source inside the Russian Foreign Ministry saying:

"We agreed in Geneva in 2012 that the current government, led by Bashar al-Asad, and the opposition group should be involved in negotiations... The position is consistent, principled, there is nothing new in it... There is a legitimate government in Syria and it must take part in the political process and hold talks with the internal and external Syrian Opposition" (Interfax News Agency 2015).

This position was reinforced by Foreign Minister Lavrov's response to questions regarding Russia's evolving response to the Syrian Civil War in an August 2015 press conference:

"We must sit down and stop pretending that only one opposition group has all of the legitimacy provided to it by the so-called international community, to make sure that all of the opposition groups are properly represented in a delegation, which must develop a constructive platform free of any preconditions for talks with the delegation representing the legitimate Syrian government" (Lavrov 2015b).

Refraining from an explicit denunciation of the National Coalition, Lavrov leveraged the growing schisms within the National Coalition to present them as equivalent to other opposition groups and argue for an inclusive approach to determining who would be invited to participate in peace talks. Beyond preventing a concentration of U.S.-supported actors in the peace negotiations, this approach also contributed to undermining the coherence of U.S.-led efforts to coordinate international responses. Although Turkey—a key U.S. ally—vehemently opposed the inclusion of Kurdish groups, Russian officials insisted on their inclusion, arguing that "...the process, which starts in Geneva, must necessarily include the Kurds, if we all mean what we say in declaring our commitment to Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Lavrov 2016). In this way, Russian officials cast the National

Coalition as having no greater standing than any other group while feeding growing tensions between the United States and Turkey.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that the ways the legitimacy master frame was used by the United States and Russia systematically differed as the governments worked at cross-purposes in responding to the Syrian Civil War. The United States and its allies rallied around the concrete and unambiguous stance that Bashar al-Assad was illegitimate and the Syrian National Coalition was legitimate. Conversely, Russia engaged in counterframing that emphasized the need for legitimate processes and the legitimacy of existing governmental institutions. Thus, differences in rhetoric emerged through the objects that were framed, rather than through the ideational content of the frame itself.

Beyond differentiating competing uses of legitimacy as a master frame, our analyses show how the objects in the frame were instrumental in shaping the effectiveness of diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and counterframing. Consistent with Snow and Benford's (1988) contention that consensus mobilization is dependent on the development of interconnected and resonant diagnostic and prognostic framing, our analysis highlights how the focal objects of diagnostic framing influenced the accomplishment of prognostic framing as well as the resonance of the United States' overall framing strategy. The formation of the Syrian National Coalition provided a seemingly credible alternative to the Assad regime, and framing the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people allowed the United States to connect its diagnostic and prognostic framing. Moreover, the formation of the National Coalition seemed to allay fears that removing Assad would simply create a power vacuum. Once the National Coalition was framed as a legitimate alternative to the Assad regime, the majority of UN member states subsequently adopted the diagnostic framing long advanced by the United States and concurred with its prognostic framing. However, by explicitly identifying the National Coalition as legitimate, the United States and FOS staked their framing to the National Coalition. As the object in the frame lost credibility, the credibility of the prognostic framing was also undermined and the framing efforts lost resonance and were subsequently destabilized.

In contrast, although Russia's overarching goal was to protect its interests in Syria (and the Middle East more generally), its strategies for pursuing this broader goal changed repeatedly throughout the first five years of the conflict. Despite these changes, Russian officials were able to coherently and consistently employ the same counterframing strategy as the conflict evolved. By focusing on the legitimacy of processes and institutions, Russia challenged the validity of international intervention that lacked approval by the national government or a unanimous international community. Again using the legitimacy master frame, Russia later justified its own military intervention because it was requested by the government of a UN member state. Although Russia initially supported Assad as the elected president of a legitimate government, it subsequently distanced itself from Assad himself while reinforcing the need for a legitimate process to establish

a new government. Focusing on legitimate processes to advocate for a democratic resolution to the conflict, Russia successfully advocated for more inclusive peace talks, which diffused power among the opposition factions. Thus, even as the conflict and their own position evolved, Russia maintained narrative fidelity and the stability of their framing.

Building on these insights, we interpret Russia's discursive focus on legitimate processes and institutions as facilitating robust discourses. As Steinberg (1998) writes, analyses of collective action framing typically assume that, "problems of stability and duration are largely processes exterior to the production of meaning within framing itself" (1998:850; emphasis in original). Successful framing helps to align aspects of the social world with existing cultural concepts and frameworks (Benford and Snow 2000; McCammon et al. 2007). Insofar as a frame provides a map of the "world out there" (Snow and Benford 1988:198), the stability of the frame is contingent on the stability of the world out there (Steinberg 1998). We observe this dynamic in the case of the U.S. framing of the National Coalition and Bashar al-Assad.

In contrast, Russia's framing strategy was robust both to situational change in the "world out there" and to Russia's evolving strategy. Our analysis indicates that this robustness resulted from the multivocality of the object in the frame. Specifically, we find that Russia's use of legitimacy was robust because the objects of discourse were (1) coherently and consistently interpretable across diverse social contexts, (2) relevant for advancing evolving agendas over time, and (3) broadly congruent with the discursive framework used to selectively punctuate and encode the objects. This allowed them to preserve flexibility and adaptability without compromising narrative fidelity.

This conception of robust discourse provides new insight into the interactional and relational dynamics of framing, extending previous scholarship that has shown how changes in the broader political opportunity structure can shape framing processes in meaningful ways (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Meyer 2004). Consequently, robustness stands as an important additional dimension of effectiveness for the study of framing. We believe that future research may benefit from incorporating robustness as a dimension of framing effectiveness alongside existing measures of effectiveness that have been used in comparative and statistical analyses examining how effective framing shapes movement outcomes (Cress and Snow 2000; McCammon 2009; McCammon et al. 2007).

Along with the theoretical implications of our research for collective action framing, our findings also speak to the relationship between international relations and the political structures that shape opportunities for social movements (Meyer 2004), contributing to research that has productively extended the theoretical boundaries of social movement framing by examining framing efforts by political elites and powerholders (Coles 1998; Cunningham and Browning 2004). This work also contributes to scholarship on the framing of violence (Coy, Woehrle, and Maney 2008; Del Rosso 2015; Nikolaev and Porpora 2006). Research in this vein has tended to focus on motivational efforts among grassroots activists (Coy et al. 2008) or justificatory discourses of elites (Del Rosso 2015; Nikolaev and Porpora 2006), and by turning attention to the dynamics of contestation in intergovernmental

tal framing/counterframing contests, our research contributes new insights to this important collection of scholarship. Finally, a growing collection of scholarship has worked to apply insights from research on collective action to advance our understanding of the 2011 revolutionary wave in the Middle East. Among the productive results of these efforts has been an increased focus on how international political opportunity structures help to explain differences in the trajectories of the 16 Middle Eastern and North African countries that were part of this wave. Reflecting on the differences in international response to the civil wars in Libya and Syria, Alimi and Meyer (2011) specifically highlight Russia and China's patronage of Syria as a key difference in the political opportunity structures of these two countries. Our research extends and complements this work, showing how framing at the international level contributes to shaping and constraining international support for national and subnational actors.

Conclusion

By analyzing competing uses of the same frame, our research highlights the importance of the object in the frame in shaping the resonance, stability, and robustness of framing efforts. These findings complement important research showing that the targets of collective action can impact movement dynamics (Bartley and Child 2014). More broadly, our conceptualization of robust discourse stands as an important and theoretically generative addition to scholarship on framing. Beyond the implications outlined above, we believe that a focus on robustness may provide insights into the discursive dimensions of contestation in strategic action fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Fields in flux often present a threat to elites and the power arrangements of a field. The discourse of political elites often significantly influences the outcomes of contested fields and may create ripple effects across multiple overlapping or nested fields. By focusing on what makes discourse robust, it is possible to assess how actors maintain consistent framing in highly visible but contested fields. Given that a field-level conceptualization of contentious politics indicates that changes in one area of the field can affect interactional dynamics in another (often unrelated) area of the field, resonance or stability may be inadequate for conceptualizing the efficacy of discourse in this context. Robust discourse provides a conceptual apparatus that accounts for the extent to which framing processes can pivot in response to evolving contests or transfer across fields as actors maintain the same discursive anchor while reorienting their meanings as the field evolves.

Notes

- 1 It is theoretically and substantively important to distinguish between the effectiveness of framing strategies versus the effects of framing on various outcomes. Multiple studies demonstrate that effective framing is one factor that can shape material outcomes and contribute to movement success (Cress and Snow 2000; McCammon et al. 2007). However, previous research explicitly distinguishes between effective framing and movement success (Ferree 2003; Snow et al. 2018). Consistent with prior literature, we treat framing effectiveness as theoretically and analytically distinct from the effects of framing on

material outcomes or movement success, and our research focuses exclusively on the dynamics of the former.

- 2 The framing dynamics studied here are situated within a broader discursive field, and their meanings were constructed dialogically (Steinberg 1999). For example, Russian counterframing repeatedly referenced U.S. discourses from past wars, and U.S. framing was built on discourses advanced by the Friends of New Libya group. Although mapping the structure of the global discursive field and fully accounting for the historical nature of these dialogues as other scholars have done (Coy, Woehrle, and Maney 2008; Steinberg 1999) is beyond the scope of this research, further research into the dialogic aspects of these framing processes is warranted.

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