

## A Critical Discourse Analysis of the CNN and Al Jazeera Coverage of the Beginning of the Syrian Crisis

دراسة نقدية تحليلية لخطابات CNN والجزيرة عن بداية الأزمة السورية

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**Abstract:** The year 2011 constitutes a turning point in Syria which witnessed the so - called the Arab Spring. The different media outlets covered the events based on their ideologies. Al Jazeera and the CNN are examples of the leading media in the world which devoted hours for covering the Syrian unrest.

The current research seeks to investigate the linguistic and discursive strategies employed by Al Jazeera and the CNN in their coverage of the first month of the Syrian uprising. It is a critical qualitative study which adopts Critical Discourse Analysis drawing on the social discursal framework of Norman Fairclough and the ideology square of T.van Dijk. The results reveal that there are differences between the two channels at the textual and discursive levels and that Al Jazeera used group polarization more obviously than the CNN.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis; ideology; Syrian unrest; Al Jazeera; CNN

**المخلص:**

تعتبر سنة 2011 نقطة تحول في سوريا التي شهدت ما يسمى بالربيع العربي، وقد قامت العديد من القنوات بتغطية الأحداث كل حسب أيديولوجيته، من بين تلك القنوات الجزيرة و CNN التي خصت ساعات من البث لتغطية الأحداث.

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تهدف هذه الدراسة النوعية النقدية إلى بحث الأساليب اللغوية والاسراتيجيات الخطابية المتبعة من طرف الجزيرة و CNN في تغطية الشهر الأول من الأزمة السورية بالاعتماد على المقاربة الاجتماعية لنورمانفاركلاف ونموذج المربع الأيديولوجي لفان ديك وقد أسفرت النتائج عن وجود اختلافات على المستويين اللغوي والخطابي بين الجزيرة و CNN، كما بينت أيضا أن الجزيرة اعتمدت القطبية في الخطاب بشكل أوضح من CNN. الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي، أيديولوجيا، الأزمة السورية، الجزيرة، CNN

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### 1. The Introduction

Media has played a critical role in the Syrian crisis since its very beginning. However, the various news corporations have not portrayed the events similarly which has resulted in multiple stories. Al Jazeera and the CNN are examples of the channels which reported the events in different narratives by emphasizing certain actions and de-emphasizing others depending on each channel's ideology.

The problem needs to be investigated in this study is the reporting of the Syrian crisis and its different actors; the protesters, the regime, the security forces and the government. Therefore, it seeks to answer the following question:

- What language has been used in the CNN and Al Jazeera coverage to frame the Syrian several fronts in the first month of the Syrian crisis?

Methodologically, this study is an attempt to apply critical discourse analysis theories to analyse the sample which consists of six randomly chosen articles. More specifically, it adopts Fairclough's social discursal framework and van Dijk's ideology square to analyse the selected articles. The findings demonstrate that there are differences between the two channels at the textual and discursive levels and that Al Jazeera used group polarization more obviously than the CNN.

### 2. Theoretical Framework:

#### 2.1 An Overview of the Syrian Crisis:

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The year 2011 witnessed a radical change in the Arab world's politics and social life due to the so-called the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring or the uprisings that took place in some of the Arab countries, starting in Tunisia, constitutes a turning point in the Arab world. People in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen revolted against their regimes in demand of democracy and social change. After approximately ten years, the situation in the countries, which witnessed the Arab Spring, remains critical especially in Syria which is the subject of the current study.

The Syrian crisis can be traced to the mid March 2011 when a number of riots started from the town of Dara'a, a city in the South, and then rapidly spread to the whole country. The protesters' demands ranged from social reforms to political ones. They asked for the freedom of speech and press and the overthrow of the president Bashar Al Assad who has been ruling Syria since 2000 succeeding his father Hafez Al Assad. The government tried to calm down the situation through announcing a set of social reforms but this was in vain as the protesters called for a radical change. Consequently, the civil demonstrations turned into a furious civil war with the government's military actions, the split opposition with its different groups, the different terrorist groups in the country (al Qaeda, al Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or what is commonly known as Daesh) and the foreign intrusion in the Syrian local issue. Another factor which led to worsening the Syrian situation is the multiplicity of the Syrian community with various ethnic groups (Arabs, Kurds, Armenians ...) and religious sects (Sunni Muslims, Shia, Alawis, Druzes, Christians and a minority of Jews).

### **2.2 Media and Ideology:**

Throughout history mass media has played a major role in conflicts and wars through constituting another front of the conflict. In describing the power of media in affecting the audience's opinions Macarro (2002) stated: "As individuals we are all influenced, our opinions shaped, reinforced and

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altered by our exposure to the media” (cited in O’Keeffe, 2006, p. 01).

Moreover, Blommaert (2005) believed that media as a powerful institution plays a great role in changing the status of ideas from being superficial into publically well established ideas and hence ideologies.

Media discourse refers: “to a totality of how reality is represented in broadcast and printed media from television to newspaper” (O’keeffe, 2006, p. 01). This idea of the representation of reality has been questioned by many linguists and media critics; raising the issue of whether what is shown in the media is a real representation of the truth or it is molded by the journalist’s ideology. In this respect, Fairclough (1995) stated that media texts “constitute versions of reality in ways which depend on the social positions and interests and objectives of those who produce them” (pp. 103-104). Moreover, media is controlled by the dominant groups who frame the news according to their ideologies and therefore affect and control the dominated groups’ minds (Fairclough N. , 1989). This may explain the multiplicity of versions presented by the various outlets as far as the Syrian crisis is concerned. Some voices/ events are foregrounded while others are backgrounded and this considerably differs from one outlet to the other.

### **2.3Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):**

The origin of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can be traced to the 1970s and 1980s. It is based on the works of Fowler, Hodge and Kress (1979) on language, power, ideology, and control and Michael Halliday’s systemic-functional linguistics (Blommaert, 2005). It is a problem oriented research which is primarily interested in concepts of dominance, ideology, control and the like. Hence, CDA is a discipline which is “concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak, 2001, p. 02). Furthermore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is: “... a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context.” (Van Dijk, Critical discourse analysis, 2001, p. 352). According to Blommaert (2005)

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media discourse and ideology are two important topics covered by CDA research. Furthermore, CDA studies language in terms of what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded to unveil the ideology behind it. Additionally, Fairclough (1989) maintained that ideologies are deeply rooted in the implicit meaning of any discourse including media discourse. Hence, an ideological analysis should focus on what is implicit rather than what is explicit.

## **3. Analytical Framework:**

### **3.1 Methodology:**

The data for this study consist of a corpus of news articles driven from the official websites of Al Jazeera and the CNN. For the aim of the present research, six (06) articles published in the first month of the Syrian uprising (March 2011) were chosen. The reason behind this choice is to investigate the way the beginning of the Syrian events were discursively represented by the two outlets.

The frameworks adopted to critically analyse the selected articles is Fairclough's Social Discoursal Approach and van Dijk's ideology square. Fairclough's Social Discoursal Approach is based on three dimensions which are: textual analysis, discursive practice and socio-cultural practice. Since there is no complete CDA and one can select just some elements to make a comprehensive investigation (Fairclough N. , 1995), the following aspects are chosen lexicalization and predication, intertextuality and topics. Additionally, van Dijk's ideology square is employed to interpret the results. This square is based on group polarization through "positive self-presentation (boasting)" and "negative other-presentation (derogation)" (Van Dijk, Ideology and discourse analysis, 2006, p. 126). These two strategies stress the idea of foregrounding the positive deeds of the group members and backgrounding the good deeds of those who do not belong to the group.

### **3.2 Data Analysis:**

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The first month of the Syrian crisis constitutes a turning point in the country's political life and diplomacy. March 2011 was the beginning of the events which were described as 'unprecedented' by the CNN and Al Jazeera. In order to analyse the way the two channels represented the crisis, three articles are chosen from Al Jazeera and three articles from the CNN corresponding to three themes which are:

1. Security forces, protesters confrontations in Daraa
2. The resignation of the Syrian government
3. Al- Assad's first speech two weeks after the events

The reason why, these three themes were chosen lies in the fact that they represent the main topics covered by the two channels in March 2011. The chosen articles are analysed starting from the analysis of the headlines and then the news story. Headlines present the gist in the article as they 'summarize the summary in one clause or sentence' (Van Dijk, How "They" hit the headlines: Ethnic minorities in the press, 1988, p. 226). Also, they play a major role in attracting the reader's attention. For the objective of the current research, headlines are analysed based on lexicalization. Lexical analysis is important to probe into the meanings encoded through the used words.

### **3.2.1 Analysis of the Headlines:**

Below are the headlines of the selected articles:

21 March 2011

- Al Jazeera: Syria deploys troops after protests: Forces gather at entrance to the Southern City of Daraa, a day after a protester was killed after a demonstration
- CNN: Protesters, security forces clash in Syria

29 March 2011

- Al Jazeera: Syrian cabinet resigns amid unrest: Government resigns as part of promised reforms after two weeks of protests, outgoing PM appointed caretaker premier
- CNN: Syrian government resigns amid unrest

30 March 2011

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- Al Jazeera: Assad blames “conspirators” for Syrian unrest: Syrian president delivers first public speech since security forces curbed anti-government protests across the country
- CNN: Syria’s al- Assad leaves state of emergency in place

Al Jazeera’s headlines are relatively long as compared to the CNN’s; they contain sub titles which provide more details to the audience. In the first headline, Al Jazeera specifies the city of the confrontations ‘Daraa’ while the CNN does not. The main headlines of the second articles are the same for the two outlets. This can be interpreted by saying that both channels drew this news from the Syrian national TV as the first part of the article shows. The sub title in Al Jazeera article gives a hint that the resignation of the government is part of the reforms and stresses the fact that the premier minister left office as well. For the third article headlines, the focus of each channel is clearly foregrounded ‘conspirators’ for Al Jazeera and ‘state of emergency’ for the CNN. The sub title in Al Jazeera stresses the idea that this is the first speech of the Syrian president since the beginning of the protests.

### **3.2.2 Analysis of the News Texts:**

#### **➤ Lexicalization and Predication:**

In the first two selected articles (published in 21 March 2011), the two outlets under scrutiny make use of a variety of lexical items to refer the protesters, the government and the demonstrations. In order to investigate the meanings attached to their actions we included examples of the used words in association with their semantic roles. Examples from Al Jazeera include: “Syrian troops is associated with have been deployed, an anti-government protester is associated with was killed, forces is associated with fired, demonstrators is associated with chanted, an 11 –year- old boy is associated with died and suffered, security forces is associated with dispersed, protesters is associated with have been demonstrating and calling for an end to corruption, rallies is associated with intensified, five civilians is associated with were killed”. The same thing for the CNN; examples include: “One person is associated with died, two people with were killed,

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five people with have died, a delegation from President Bashar al Assad with offered, opponents of the al Assad associated with allege, Protesters with are calling for reform”.Analysing the lexicalization used in both articles shows that the two outlets portray the protesters positively while negatively represent the security forces. The protesters are represented as mere victims to the regime’s forces.

In the second set of articles (published in 29 March 2011), the president Bashar al- Assad is being referred to eight times in Al Jazeera article and twice in the CNN. He is referred to as Assad, he and the president in both channels. Additionally, the police and security forces in Al Jazeera are associated with “armed, cracked down and fired” to stress the non peaceful reaction. In the CNN the word “clash” is used to refer to what happened between protesters and security forces (protesters and security forces clash, security forces and anti-government protesters have sporadically clashed). Moreover, Aljazeera used the word “chaos” to describe the pro government demonstrations and the word “protest” to describe the anti government protests. This can be interpreted by saying that the channel implicitly sides by the anti government protesters. An important point noticed in this article is mentioning the idea that the Baath Party has been ruling Syria since 1963 twice by Al Jazeera. Additionally, Al Jazeera made it explicit that the government has little power. Supporters of the regime are referred to as supporters of Assad, the crowd and the people (associated with poured, raised and wanted respectively). The CNN, on the other hand, used tens of thousands of Syrians (poured into streets), many demonstrators (held posters), crowds (filled the square and jammed), the pro-government rally (followed) to refer to the regime supporters. Both articles agree that what is happening in Syria is totally new by using expressions like “unprecedented dissent, a wave of dissent, a wave of deadly dissent, being unthinkable” by Al Jazeera and “unusual wave of unrest” by the CNN.

Regarding the third set of articles (published in 30 March 2011), since these two articles revolve around al Assad’s speech, most of the lexical items are used to refer to the president or his speech. The words used to refer to him in the two articles are: “al Assad, Assad, the president, Bashar al –Assad and he”. Al Jazeera referred to the anti- government protests and the Baath Party as well. The CNN described the speech using the adjective “rambling” implying that it is too long and confusing.



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### ➤ **Intertextuality:**

In the first set of articles (published in 21 March 2011), Al Jazeera foregrounds the anti-government protesters' voice and backgrounds the regime's voice which is totally absent in this article. The CNN, on the other hand, gave weight to voices of the two sides of the conflict but with making the anti-government voice more prominent through representing it at the beginning and end of the article and through devoting more space to the opposition. In this respect, Fairclough (1995) considered that the space devoted to each voice can make one more prominent than the other. Another important point which can be raised is the position of voices which can be ideologically based. An example from the CNN is "Two people were killed during demonstrations in the city Friday, according to SANA. According to witnesses five people have died in Daraa since Friday." positioning witnesses' claim just after the state news agency can be ideologically based; it may show the CNN's siding by the protesters. The foregrounded voices can be explained with reference to the ideologies of the two outlets; The CNN, being an American corporation, claims democracy and freedom so it tried to portray all the parts' voices but through implicitly siding by the protesters via making their voice more prominent. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, is the voice of the voiceless and it is commonly known as the Arab citizens' voice (El- Nawawi & Powers, 2008) so it is there to make the citizens voice heard that is why it excluded the regime's voice as it is heard in the other outlets held by the government like SANA.

Al Jazeera relied on eight sources of information in this article. It reported a resident witness from the AFP news agency, Reuters, news agencies, Al Jazeera's correspondent Rula Amin, activists, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the dissident Haithem al Maleh who has the lion's share in this article. Some of these voices are neutral; do not belong to any side of the conflict, while the others represent the protesters excluding the government's voice. It must be mentioned that even the neutral voices are employed to stress the positive side of the protesters and the negative side of the regime. An example is "Another witness said security forces had been deployed to block protesters, ...".

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Al Jazeera used three types of reported speech in this article: direct quotation, indirect quotation, and strategic quotation, or ‘scare quotes’. Indirect quotes are more employed in this article than the other two types. According to Fairclough (1995) in indirect speech the choice of words can be skeptical because the words chosen can have other meanings or even ideological connotations. Strategic quotation is generally used to distance oneself from what is said. It is used in this article to report the slogans repeated by demonstrators “Just God, Syria and Freedom”, “Revolution, revolution” and to report Al Jazeera’s correspondent Rula Amin when she said: the situation was still “very tense but quiet” .

Unlike Al Jazeera, the CNN echoed just three voices, the Syrian News Agency SANA, witnesses and a local leader from Daraa called Mohammed Sheikh. As it has been already noted, the CNN presented the voices of the two sides of the conflict. The witnesses emphasized the positive aspect of protesters and the negative aspect of the state forces. An Example of that is “One person died Sunday in clashes between anti-government protester and security forces ...”

Like Al Jazeera, the CNN used three types of reported speech in this article: direct quotation, indirect quotation, and strategic quotation, or ‘scare quotes’. The indirect outnumber the other types. The strategic quotation is used by the article’s writer to distance the channel from what is claimed by SANA “official sources” and “group of troublemakers”.

For the second articles under analysis (published in 29 March 2011), both articles start with introducing the resignation of the government relying on the Syrian National News Agency. This is because the Syrian national news agency is the channel of the regime so it will be the first channel to have such a news. Al Jazeera echoed nine voices which are the Syrian national news agency, a man called Abu Khodr (who belongs to the supporters of al Assad), Al Jazeera’s correspondent, Human Rights Watch, lawyers, Bouthaina Shaaban (the senior adviser to the president), Farouq al-Shara (the vice president), senior official and unidentified sources. The CNN, on the other hand, relied on three sources only which are the state-run SANA news agency, Reem Haddad (a spokeswoman for the Syrian Information Ministry) and the High Commissioner for Human Rights. For al- Jazeera, the most prominent voice is the authorial voice since it has the lion’s share in this article. For the CNN, it is very apparent that the prominent voice is SANA which is pro to the government and the regime.

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Both channels used direct and indirect quotation but the indirect ones outnumber the direct quotations.

For the third articles (published in 30 March 2011), Al Assad's voice is echoed in both articles. Al Jazeera echoed Bashar al-Assad, Al Jazeera's correspondent from Damascus and Rula Amin. The CNN reported al Assad, Philip Luther, Amnesty International deputy director for the Middle East and Africa, Mark Toner (U.S. state department deputy spokesman), Human Rights Watch, Reem Hadda (a spokeswoman for the Syrian Information Ministry), eyewitnesses, an activist, Reuters news agency, a Syrian official, Ihssan Zouabi (a protester from Daraa), and a Syrian right activist.

Both articles make use of direct, strategic and indirect quotation. Al Jazeera reported two direct quotes from al- Assad's speech while the CNN reported five. Strategic quotation is used much in these two articles quoting expressions like "conspirators", "test of unity", in Al Jazeera and "conspiracy", "test of unity", "stability", "conspirators""martyrs" in the CNN. There are many instances of indirect quotes in both articles.

The most prominent voice in Al Jazeera article is the authorial voice given the huge space devoted to it. The voices of the Amnesty International director for the Middle East and Africa, US state department spokesman, anti government protesters, Human Rights Watch, witnesses and activists are more prominent in the CNN article. This is because the CNN focused more on people's reactions after the speech.

### **➤ Topics:**

The first two articles tackle approximately the same general topic which is the confrontations between security forces and protesters in Daraa. However, there are some sub themes which are excluded by Aljazeera and others which are excluded by the CNN. Al Jazeera covered the following topics: deploying troops in Daraa, demonstrations after the funeral of Raed Akrad, the slogans chanted by anti- government protesters, the death of an 11 year old boy, the killing of five civilians, setting fire on buildings including the headquarters of the ruling Baath Party, protests in other cities other than Daraa, arrests, corruption and the demanded reforms from the point of view of the dissident Haitham al- Maleh. The CNN, on the other

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hand, covered the following topics: the death of one person in Daraa, the delegation sent by al Assad to offer condolences, attacking policemen, the people killed in a demonstration, the reforms demanded by al- Assad's opponents.

Al Jazeera focused on the protesters and neglected the efforts made by the Syrian government; it excluded the part of the condolences from its coverage. Furthermore, it did not make a hint to the injured police officers. This can be explained by the ideology of the channel which is established to give voice to the Arab citizens. The CNN, at the other end of the spectrum, did not mention the protests in the other Syrian cities and it focused only on Daraa may be because it did not expect that what is happening in Daraa will spread to the other Syrian cities.

The second two articles deal with the same general topic which is the resignation of the Syrian government. Al Jazeera's article, however, is relatively long to the extent that it is divided into sub sections entitled: chaos, Expected reforms and Protest violence. Indeed the article starts by talking about the main theme which is the government resignation, then, it speaks about the government which has little power stressing the idea that power is in the hands of the president, his family and the security apparatus. Focusing on this point, Al Jazeera implies that the government resignation will make no change in Syria since it is powerless. It can be also an implicit call for demanding a radical change which is taking power from the regime and its security apparatus. After that, it moves to the prime minister then the expected speech by al Assad and the expected reforms. Then, it moves to describing the pro government protests, which are included under the title "chaos", and the expected reforms and it describes how protests have become violent; hinting to the "violence" practised by security forces. It ends with speaking about the criticism that al- Assad received and his expected speech.

The CNN article focuses on the resignation of the government, the expected speech and the pro government demonstrations. Thus, it excluded the other topics covered by Al Jazeera.

The third two articles are concerned with al Assad's first speech but with different foci. Al Jazeera foregrounds the idea of "conspirators" using it in the headline and the first part of the article while the CNN foregrounds the issue of the "state of emergency" speaking about it in the headline and the first part of the article. Moreover, the CNN focuses more on people's

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reactions while Al Jazeera focuses on the speech and the government resignation to the extent that it repeated some chunks which dealt with the government resignation from the previous article.

### **4. The conclusion:**

From the analysis of lexicalization, intertextuality and topicalization one can conclude that Al Jazeera used group polarization more than the CNN. For Al Jazeera, the anti-government protesters form the in-group while the regime and its security forces constitute the out-group. Protesters are associated with semantic roles as “were killed, died, called for and suffered” while security forces are associated with “fired, dispersed, cracked down and curbed”. Hence, at the level of lexicalization the protesters are represented as victims to the “oppressing” security forces. At the level of intertextuality, the regime’s voice is marginalized to varying degrees in the three chosen articles by Al Jazeera. It is completely excluded in the first article while it is not the prominent one in the remaining two articles; the prominent voices are the protesters’ voice in the first article, and authorial voices in the other two articles. The authorial voice seems to be in favor of the in-group since it reports the regime and the government negatively. At the level of topicalization, Al Jazeera excluded the topic of the official delegation sent by al Assad to offer condolences. This topic is in favor of the out-group. Another important point is the powerless government which is repeatedly reported by Al Jazeera (in articles 2 and 3) but excluded by the CNN. Moreover, reporting how “peaceful” protests became violent due to the security forces and the criticism addressed by the West to al Assad because of that are presented by Al Jazeera and not by the CNN which can show how Al Jazeera used polarized discourse.

Polarization became apparent in the CNN articles starting from the third article. As far as intertextuality is concerned, the voices of the two sides of the conflict were echoed with a favor of the anti government protesters in the first and the government in the second through echoing the state run national agency SANA. The third article constitutes a turning point since the prominent voices have been radically altered through representing the voices of the Amnesty International director for the Middle East and Africa, US state department spokesman, Human Rights Watch, anti government witnesses and activists. All

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these voices were in favor of the anti government protesters. The same thing can be observed at the level of topicalization; the first two articles tackled the casualties of both sides of the conflict, the anti and the pro government demonstrations, the resignation of the government, the demanded reforms and the expected speech. The third article, however, focuses on the state of emergency and how people were oppressed after the speech. Hence, the in-group out-group dichotomy started to be apparent in the third article for the CNN.

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**6. Appendices:** Due to the length of the analysed articles, the researcher found that it is more practical to include just the websites.

#### Appendix A

##### Al Jazeera Articles

Article 1:<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/3/21/syria-deploys-troops-after-protests>

Article 2:<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/3/29/syrian-cabinet-resigns-amid-unrest>

Article 3:<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/3/30/assad-blames-conspirators-for-syria-unrest>

#### Appendix B

##### CNN Articles

## A Critical Discourse Analysis of the CNN and Al Jazeera Coverage of the Beginning of the Syrian Crisis

Article1:<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/20/syria.clashes/index.html>

Article2:<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/29/syria.unrest/index.html>

Article3:<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/30/syria.unrest/index.html>