

# Seeking ontological security through thick narratives: Syrian civil war, ontological insecurity, and narratives

Cooperation and Conflict  
1–27

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DOI: 10.1177/00108367241269639

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## Abstract

Civil war can change the narratives of a collective Self and damage some of its ontological security conditions, such as continuity, self-esteem, and consistency. Using a qualitative analysis of the Facebook pages visited widely by the residents of Salamieh City in Syria (a stronghold for Ismailis), this study shows how narratives of a collective Self (both local Salamieh and national Syrian Selves) have been generated to cope with threats to ontological security imposed by the ongoing civil war. Following our finding that the pro-regime and neutral pages could have used thin narratives of ontological security but instead stuck to thick narratives, we argue that thick narrative opens up possibilities to understand complex reality and generate a rich meaning-system and strong agency. Contrary to the claim that a simple Self is more ontologically secure because its narrative is easily kept continuous and routinized, this study shows that confronting reality and tolerating change through thick narratives despite the anxiety and pain the process generates, can provide ontological security in the future.

## Keywords

civil war, ontological security, Syria, thick narrative, thin narrative

## Introduction

Civil wars tremendously affect human lives and generate narratives justifying violence and normalizing atrocities. They not only cause physical damage but also change or strain the collective identities of warring groups through war narratives justifying the dehumanization of and violence toward others. This changes the way a group sees itself and others, increasing violence and dehumanization among groups that have historically shown enmity toward each other.

Every group has a distinctive collective Self constructed by a meaning-system, values, and rules which determine relations with others. To sustain its ontological security, this Self needs to remain consistent over time and imbued with self-esteem. A loss of consistency in civil wars may lead to anxiety since members of the collective lose their

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cognitive schemata to interpret the world around them and grasp a coherent and respected image of themselves. War narratives can easily generate such anxiety because of the changes they cause in the collective identity. Groups, therefore, need to adopt strategies to counter ontological insecurity.

In this article, we investigate how a local group in the Syrian civil war has dealt with such insecurity. More specifically, we analyze how using complex/thick or simple/thin narratives of the collective Self succeeds or fails to strengthen ontological security. We argue, based on our analysis, that ontological security is better sustained when the Self narrates itself and the world in a complex and rich way. Thick narratives more successfully provide the Self with ontological security than thin/simple narratives; therefore, actors utilize thick narratives as a means of maintaining strong ontological security even if such narratives force the Self to live through anxiety. In other words, thick narratives, contrary to thin narratives, form a solid ground for ontological security even if the actor might initially undergo an anxious process by choosing to narrate her or his experiences thickly. Adding to the existing literature on ontological security in which scholars have emphasized the significance of narrative content (e.g. consistent meanings) in the establishment and sustainment of ontological security (Kinnvall, 2004), we show that narrative form, that is, *how* an event/story is narrated (i.e. thickly, or thinly), also matters for a collective's ontological (in)security.

The literature on ontological security has not paid much attention to the relationship between thick/thin narratives and ontological security. A few studies investigating this relationship have emphasized the need for a thin narrative for ontological security. For example, Kinnvall and Mitzen (2018: 826) argued that seeking simplicity is a strategy to keep the Self ontologically secure, since “disruptions [generate] fear and anxiety; and these create fertile conditions for a public seeking comfort in *simple* answers . . . and longing for a *simpler* (if fictive) time of cultural homogeneity and happiness” (emphasis added). Many existentialist scholars, such as Rumelili (2015), Browning and Joenniemi (2017), and Gustafsson (2021), have argued that the Self embraces anxiety to improve or maintain its ontological security, but they have not discussed how. We argue that the collective Self does so by choosing to face reality *as it is* to generate a complex narrative about itself because a thick narrative is generated when it unearths rather than avoids reality. Thick narrative, therefore, is instrumental for the Self to tolerate change and grow out of it despite the anxiety it might encounter while pursuing ontological security.

In what follows, we first discuss collective identity and ontological security, before analyzing the effects of civil war on ontological security and the narratives collectives use to sustain their ontological security. To answer our question about the relationship between ontological security and thin/thick narratives, we apply thematic analysis using public Facebook pages visited widely by the people of Salamieh for news and everyday life issues. In the analysis section, we study Salamieh City's dominant war narratives. We conclude by explaining how thin and thick narratives relate to ontological security.

## Collective identity and ontological security

Collective identity has two main dimensions. First, it is sustained and (re)shaped by norms, meaning-systems, and attributes (e.g. language), which form the *content* of that

identity (Chandra, 2012; Chandra and Wilkinson, 2008). Second, it is defined by a *boundary-system*, demarcating friends, enemies, and those who can/cannot belong to a specific group (David and Bar-Tal, 2009).

The content dimension is not fixed. Rather, a group must continually sustain its content because it exists only when it is socially practiced through a continuous process of silencing and priming in which some attributes dwindle while others are emphasized (Chandra, 2012). What is silenced or primed depends on context and interactions with other groups. For example, during a civil war, a group prioritizes different attributes than during times of peace. The boundary-system dimension manages intergroup relations, demarcating a line between in-group and out-group. The two dimensions are entangled as the collective identity's content is unimaginable without encountering others (Rumelili and Todd, 2018).

Both the content and boundary-system dimensions are manifested in the social representation of a group, which is a complex set of ideas, symbols, and cognitive schemata in a society. This forms the immaterial, autonomous, and abstract milieu within which a collective exerts its identity (Moscovici, 1988). It is also the anchor of collective identity, first, because it provides the immaterial repertoire from which the members receive their norms, belief-systems, and others' images, and, second, because it is the field in which a group injects its own meaning-systems to imbue the world with its cognitive schemata (Breakwell, 2014).

Identity is threatened whenever one of these dimensions is harmed (Barnett and Breakwell, 2003). The causes of such threats vary enormously. They can result from a rupture in the routine of intergroup relations (changing the boundary-system) or a moral crisis damaging the meaning-system of the identity's content. For example, a rupture in self-continuity (e.g. from an outbreak of war) can force a collective to rethink who it considers as enemy (boundary-system) as well as how it defines its values (content). Ontological security scholars study the nature and causes of such harms by scrutinizing the identity–security nexus and the conditions shaping the sense of security or anxiety of collective or individual Selves (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 2020).

Ontological security is the ability of a collective/individual Self to articulate and maintain its identity and to keep its strong sense of agency in the social and material environment (i.e. home) where it exists and acts. In this definition, there are three discursive “locations” of the Self in relation to ontological security: the Self's identity, its agency, and its sense of belonging (to home). When the Self, through the meaning-system it has established, can interpret external events and narratives about them in a way that makes sense to itself, it is said to be ontologically secure (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020; Kinnvall, 2019). Such interpretations need to provide answers to fundamental questions, such as what is happening in the world, how such events affect relations with others, and how they affect the Self's continuity and its possible limits (Ejdus, 2018). Although this is an important requirement of ontological security emphasized by many scholars, some scholars have accentuated stability (Abramson, 2019; Giddens, 1991), while others have focused on openness and change (Innes, 2017) as important aspects of meaning-making.

This study, in line with Rumelili (2015, 2018, 2021), argues that ontological security implies an open meaning-system that endows the Self with reflexivity over its past, and present, as well as its values. Ontologically secure individuals/groups are adaptive to

changing environments and are able to understand and narrate a certain level of continuity from the past to the future (Mitha et al., 2017), while at the same time endure change (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017). In doing so, they need to maintain consistency in their meaning-systems (Kinnvall, 2004; Rumelili, 2018). However, consistency does not rule out some degree of opaqueness (Rossdale, 2015), or multiplicity of meanings and self-narratives, as Lacanian ontological security theory entails (Eberle, 2019). Moreover, ontological security requires the meaning-system to be authentic, real, and genuine (Laing, 2010). The Self should be empowered with strong and solid grounds of narrative that shows authentic truth (Kinnvall, 2004) and integrity (Croft, 2012). This authenticity in turn begets self-esteem as the collective Self recognizes and performs its worthiness in the world among others (Sani et al., 2008; Steele, 2005).

The collective Self needs to be agentic to maintain its ontological security (Mitzen, 2006). As argued by the Giddensian school of ontological security, agency can be practiced by having a relatively stable routine (Kinnvall, 2004), which is challenged by Flockhart (2016) who argued that it can be practiced even through ruptures in routines, if necessary, to unlock potentials and establish a better understanding of the Self that should be able to control its life. Following up on Flockhart, as well as existential scholars, such as Rumelili (2015), Browning and Joenniemi (2017), and Gustafsson (2021), this study argues that ontological security encompasses open and flexible meaning-systems, complex and multiple yet authentic narratives of the Self's identity (e.g. by showing self-esteem) in addition to narratives of strong agency.

It also requires that the Self develops a strong sense of belonging, materialized mostly through its attachment to home. Home is a social and material environment to which the sense of the Self is emotionally and symbolically attached (Kinnvall, 2004). The Self produces its auto-narrative and anchors both its meaning-system and its agency to home, which provides a safe space for it (Ejdus, 2017; Lupovici, 2023). Having a home means that the Self can enjoy "spatial extensions . . . to appear more firm, continuous and real" (Ejdus, 2021: 264–265). However, not all homes can provide such a safe space where the Self can feel safe, meaningful, belonging to that place, agentic and capable. How home is narrated, that is, whether it fosters or undermines the positive sense of the Self becomes an important research area for ontological security.

In sum, the Self is ontologically insecure when the collective Self's meaning-system is fragile and flawed with inconsistencies, empty as it does not "make sense," worthless and self-denigrating in the eyes of the group members, and obsolete, or non-authentic (Rumelili, 2015; Vieira, 2018). Ontological insecurity is also a result of agentlessness as the collective Self appears weak and unable to control its own life (Lupovici, 2014). Abhorrent homes and dis-attachment from social and material environments push the Self toward ontological insecurity as it fails to build a coherent, meaningful, and agentic narrative (Ejdus, 2021). When the Self's ontological security starts to collapse, it adopts certain strategies to restore it and evade anxiety, which will be discussed in the following section.

### *Ontological security seeking strategies*

Novel contexts, such as civil wars, may beget new meanings that contradict the collective Self's existing beliefs as war narratives inject these meanings into social

representation, resulting in ontological insecurity of individuals/groups. Encountering such threats, therefore, takes place through narrative strategies aiming to restore ontological security, known as ontological security seeking strategies (SSSs) (Bloom, 2013).

Many SSSs focus on blocking a threat by denying it so that the collective Self can continue its narrative as if nothing bad is happening (Tetlock and Oppenheimer, 2008). Greve (2018: 868) argued that when the Self is rejected by others, “[a]ctors refuse to change their self-identity or *deny* the mismatch” between their self-identity and how others perceive them (emphasis added). Such SSSs can also be practiced by inserting narratives about in-group harmony into the social representation, thereby keeping “annoying” narratives in the social representation milieu weak (Bar-Tal, 2017; Shahar et al., 2018). SSSs can also involve simplifying the Self because a simple Self is easier to manage when threatened (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2018). Similarly, it is easier to protect one road from bandits than a network of roads. Othering is another strategy (Kinnvall, 2004, 2019). It helps stabilize the Self by distancing it from the Other, who may provoke inconsistency or require undesired changes in the self-narrative (Croft, 2012). These strategies share a tendency to ignore unpleasant events and restore the ex-ante status of the Self without facing the ensuing anxiety or conducting any change in the Self.

On the contrary, several ontological security scholars have argued that anxiety, although painful, can be an opportunity to improve the Self’s potential, and hence its understanding of the Other (Rumelili and Celik, 2017). Anxiety should not be repressed by ignoring it; rather, it should be embraced to emancipate the Self. In this line, Eberle (2019: 253), a scholar whose writings can be located within the school of post-structuralism and Lacanianism, argued that the Self should engage in a “perpetual exercise of doubt as an ethical imperative.” Similarly, Untalan (2020), from the post-colonial school of ontological security, indicated that post-colonial ontological security drives the Self to accept the Other as an open and multiple site that can serve as an opportunity for the Self to reflect on its own narrative, instead of excluding the Other. Lupovici (2023) also argued that a collective can change its own content and boundary-system to cope with new realities, and new relations with the Other. Rumelili (2015, 2021), like other existentialists, understood anxiety as a *moment of freedom*, when the Self can break free of its routines to discover new possibilities of being. This line of arguments imbues SSSs with activities that cope with anxiety by confronting and embracing it and conducting changes in the Self’s identity. Parallel to this line of thinking, we also argue that SSSs are better understood as the ability of the Self to face anxiety and engage in confronting reality without shielding itself behind *illusions* of stability, self-esteem, or strong agency.

Next, we investigate how a narrative is told—thinly or thickly—and its relation to ontological security in the following section.

## Thin/thick narratives and ontological security

In this article, we introduce a new strategy to seek ontological security—a *form* of narrative, that is, *how* the Self narrates the world and itself. This form has not been systematically studied in the ontological security literature. Drawing on Randall et al.’s (2015) and McGregor’s (2015) studies of narrative thickness/thinness, we define thick narrative as a narrative indicating *complex* ideas and several notions, covering a wide array of reality

and events, and swirling around a plot (or focal point) which is open to various possibilities and further investigations. Meaning in a thick narrative is rich and requires some degree of interpretation. On the contrary, a thin narrative is *simple*, closed, direct in depicting reality, and easily understood.

Complexity is the main element of thick narrative. To define complexity, we build on the literature that has utilized it for analyzing political discourse in International Relations (Suedfeld et al., 1993; Suedfeld and Tetlock, 2014) and in Political Communication (Tolochko and Boomgaarden, 2019). Complexity entails (1) a *multiplicity* of perspectives and dimensions of meanings, which refers to the number of viewpoints presented in a narrative, and (2) *richness* in meanings, which manifests as comprehension and integrative conceptualization of various viewpoints to create a coherent whole of meaning. Among the few political studies that have used the thinness/thickness term, De Groot et al. (2014) applied it to differentiate students' understandings of democracy. For him, a thick understanding meant that democracy is a political system with multiple dimensions (not limited to the dimension of election).

Inspired by sociopsychological research (Slone and Roziner, 2013), we argue that a thick narrative, contrary to a thin narrative, can be utilized as an SSS since it is strongly associated with a richer agency and a creative and resilient Self that can generate new and solid meanings. As we see above, thick narrative is multiple and rich, requiring interpretation to open new possibilities and endow the Self with flexibility in facing and understanding changes, enriching the Self's meaning-system and identity. Flexibility, according to Mitzen (2006), refers to the Self's ability to break free from a fixed routine and stagnant meaning-system by updating its self-conception, which is a healthy way to pursue ontological security.

Because thick narrative is laboriously produced, the Self clings to flexibility as it navigates alternatives and possible viewpoints in making it and cannot escape self-criticism during this navigation. Reality is the main resource from which the Self makes meaning as the more it can diversify its meaning-system, the more it becomes engaged with reality, which in turn asserts the Self's authenticity, enriches its attachment to and a sense of belonging, and nurtures its agency as a result of the "brave" confrontation of the surrounding world.

Scholars such as Cash (2017) and Innes (2017), who analyzed the relationship between thick narratives and ontological security, made similar arguments. Innes (2017: 384), for example, argued "that ontological security is not a linear narrative but is produced in complex interactions among identity groups and among individuals and hybrid experiences of identity." Following up on them as well as Rumelili (2015, 2021) and Gustafsson (2016, 2021), we suggest that the Self can restore ontological security not by seeking simplicity or securitizing the Other (e.g. Kinnvall, 2004), which thin narrative can achieve, but by seeking complexity that endows the Self with authenticity, richer meanings, agency, and a deep sense of belonging (to home).

The laborious carving of thick narrative strengthens the Self's capacity to make meaning by facing reality—not avoiding it—hence, it develops a more authentic meaning-system as it reflects on (and criticizes) the surrounding environment. Even if the Self might suffer anxiety during this reflexive process, by facing reality it aims to achieve a better self-understanding and self-growth. However, choosing to avoid or selectively



narrate and simplify unpleasant conditions by utilizing a thin narrative can lead to a loss of self-confidence to adapt to future challenges, leaving the Self with fear, especially in cases of disruptions. Civil wars can create such contexts where the Self needs to choose between a simple thin narrative or a thick one to make sense of its environment, identity, and agency, which is discussed in the next section.

## **Collective identity and ontological security during civil war**

Civil war threatens both physical and ontological security through different forms of violence used as a tool to achieve goals. During civil war, over time, narratives, and conceptions of Self and Other become deep-rooted and crucial for ontological security. Especially in cases of civil war in which there is asymmetry between the warring parties (e.g. between a state actor and minorities), conflicts affect the narratives of the ontologically more secure state parties and less secure minority groups (Rumelili and Celik, 2017).

During a civil war, relations between the warring groups deteriorate through war narratives or conflict ethos (Kalyvas, 2006, 2008). Some ontological security scholars have argued that conflicts provide a framework of ontological security (Mitzen, 2006), and conflict narratives can contain and curb existential anxieties (Rumelili, 2015), making parties stick to the established narratives about Self and Other. In other words, uncertainty created through civil war increases the attractiveness of the ideas, identities, and practices associated with conflict (Rumelili and Celik, 2017). To be effective, a war narrative must justify human rights abuses and de-humanize enemies so that the collective Self accepts these atrocities without guilt (Bar-Tal and Alon, 2016; Kaplan, 2013). Such justifications increase belonging to the collective Self, while delegitimizing the Other's narratives.

Rumelili and Çelik (2017) further argued that especially in conflicts where there is power asymmetry, such as in civil wars between a state and minorities, minority groups remain in a continuous state of ontological insecurity, while majority group members enjoy a more privileged status in terms of a stable state of ontological security. However, although vulnerable to spoilers of different conflict resolution processes/initiatives, they argue that minority groups are also freer in their pursuit of change. Moreover, civil wars may generate ontological insecurity at their outset (Kinnvall, 2018), and due to ensuing changes violent norms dominate civilian norms (Berger, 2019), trust among in-group members vanishes (Kuol, 2014), and groups *redefine* themselves to deal with trauma (Petersen, 2012). These changes are translated into narratives injected into the social representation as minority groups struggle to ensure that their war narratives are legitimized. Hence, civil wars may delegitimize the minority's established narratives, creating dominant narratives about the reasons for the conflict, legitimacy of the actors, and group boundaries (Çelik, 2021). Therefore, to understand ontological (in)security, analyzing how the group narrates itself and the Other and how it sees intergroup power relations and legitimacy becomes important. In other words, studying ontological insecurity requires analyzing "individuals' and groups' understanding of the nature of the conflict, everyday violence, and how they are perceived by the Other" (Çelik, 2015: 67).

During civil wars, “daily insecurities, and especially insecurity of identities . . . continue to disrupt people’s lives, regenerate and exacerbate grievances and mistrust of governments” (Glucksam, 2018:91), leading to ontological insecurities especially of minority groups. These insecurities challenge collective identities by threatening homes, cultures, and existence, as Glucksam (2018) argued:

[Civil wars] often threaten the home, the culture and the very existence of social groups, sometimes for several generations. In the process, traditional war dichotomies such as home/front, victim/perpetrator and soldier/rebel are blurred or even intentionally erased. Consequently, a crisis evolves around these identity frames, bringing agents to seek routines that protect the continuity of their group identity and justify actions against the antagonistic identity group. (p. 93)

Since relationships with other social groups and social and physical environment within which such relations take place affect ontological security conditions (Weaver et al., 1998), certain actors, such as political figures, security agents, and other social groups become important tools to understand how a group perceives its ontological security and the strategies it develops to respond to such threats. This study investigates the narratives used by a minority group (namely, the Ismailis of Salamieh City, Syria) to uncover how people seek to cope with ontological insecurities during a civil war using different war narratives, as described in the following section.

## **Methodology**

This study employed inductive, interpretive, and latent thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2006) to study narratives from Facebook pages about Salamieh City to understand local Ismailis’ narratives during Syria’s civil war. Thematic analysis is a flexible method of identifying, analyzing, reporting, and interpreting patterns (themes) within data in different disciplines (see, for example, Tan and Perudin (2019) for its use in understanding geopolitical factors in the Syrian civil war). It is widely used especially in research using social media data.

Salamieh City, located in central Syria, has an estimated 200,000 residents. Ismailis are the majority group at 70% of the inhabitants (but only 1% of Syria’s total population). Sunni, Alawite, and other groups account for the other 30%. Ismailis are a branch of Shia Muslims, differing from other Shias by having only one Imam at a time who descends from the Prophet Muhammad and Ali bin Abi Talep (through the latter’s marriage to Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter). The current Imam is Aga Khan IV. In intra-state conflicts, ontological security of the dominant collective rests on the assumption that the majority group’s narratives become dominant, suppressing the minority-Other’s narratives about the conflict (Çelik, 2015). Hosting one of Syria’s minority groups as a majority, Salamieh City, therefore, serves as a good case study to look at the ontological insecurity narratives of a group which is simultaneously a local majority and a national minority during the civil war.

Salamieh City residents have engaged in the civil war in various ways oscillating between participating in demonstrations against the regime to joining the government’s army and paramilitary to fight the opposition. Although various military groups have



**Table 1.** Facebook pages.

Name	Political stance	Page content/information
Salamieh al-Hadath	Pro-regime	Mouthpiece of Ba'ath Party
Salamieh Huna	Pro-regime	Pro-Ismaili
Shabaka Salamieh and Reif	Pro-regime	Focuses on military and political analysis
Salamieh Wikileaks	Neutral	Criticizes the economic and social performance of the government (closed because of the government pressure in 2020)
Salamieh Ehbaria	Neutral	Focuses on the economic situation (turned into an advertising page in 2021 because of government pressure)
Salamieh 24	Neutral	Focuses on social and economic issues (turned into an advertising page in 2021 because of government pressure)
Bari Sharqi	Neutral	Focuses on political, social, and economic issues (became pro-regime in 2021)
Salamieh al-Haqiqa	Neutral	Critical against the regime, and covers economic, political, and identity-related issues.
Salamieh Now	Neutral	Covers very general especially daily life issues (turned into an advertising page in 2021 because of government pressures)
Qamous Salamna Group	Neutral	Publishes short stories, photos, and jokes by the Salamieh residents.
Media Body of Salamieh and its Suburb	Opposition	The only oppositional page. Calls for thwarting the regime clearly and describes Assad as a war criminal and a tyrant.

Pro-regime page: Clearly supports the president, the army, the Ba'ath Party.

Neutral page: Criticizes the state without considering the 2011 events as revolution and supporting the opposition.

Opposition page: Defines itself as revolutionary.

conducted kidnappings, arbitrary arrests, and rocket attacks, Salamieh has not been completely destroyed in contrast to many Syrian cities. The fact that the city's majority Ismaili population is in turn surrounded by a Sunni Muslim majority is an additional factor making this city a good case for studying the complex impact of war on Self and the relations between the Self and Others.

As explained earlier, social representation is the milieu into which narratives are injected and the anchor for any collective Self. To understand Salamieh's social representation, we gathered around 1000 posts from 11 public Facebook pages published between January 2019 and July 2021 with different ideological positions based on the following three criteria: the page had at least 4000 followers, it covered everyday life issues in Salamieh City, and the page had been active for at least a year before 2019. The selected Facebook pages (Table 1) covered local events reported on local issues (such as where Salamieh residents can find fuel), and propagated ideas.

The unit of analysis in the study is a single Facebook post. All posts from the selected pages except those that are irrelevant to the civil war and ontological security, such as

advertisement posts, repetitive posts, and jokes to attract followers (such as jokes about marriage) were included in the analysis. In other words, the posts that did not relate in any way to the war, social relations, economic situations, political discussions, state apparatuses, and ideologies were excluded. The posts included for analysis ranged between reactions to certain political and economic events (people complaining about frequent upticks in bread prices, celebrating soldiers coming back from the front, etc.), and social and cultural stories showing how locals cope with the war by emphasizing education or encouraging solidarity between neighbors.

Based on our thematic analysis, we identified three major categories: collective Self, power relations, and legitimacy. Each category revealed two sub-categories with distinct actors or actions: from “collective self” emerged “national Self” and “local Self”; from “power relations” emerged “army” and “state”; and from “legitimacy” emerged “legitimization” and “delegitimization.”

These sub-categories, like the three major categories found through the thematic analysis, were built by detecting similarities and differences: each sub-category includes instances (i.e. Facebook posts) that are similar in the topic they present and—at the same time—different from other topics presented by instances in other sub-categories. For each sub-category, we detected several attributes that describe it. These attributes were defined according to the actors’ characteristics, their actions, and the meanings of these actions. We grouped similar attributes as a thematic group, which can be seen in Table 2. For example, posts referring to the national ideology, national actors, their actions, and reactions to such actions, negatively or positively, were grouped under the sub-category of national Self, whereas posts talking about local actors, such as cultural and economic elites, local activities, the history of and social relations in Salamieh, negatively or positively, were grouped under the sub-category of local Self. Both sub-categories form the Collective Self since they represent the features of the bonds to others derived from common identification with a local or a national group.

Similarly, the posts about a poor health-system, collapsing educational system, lack of food, shortage of electricity, polluted water, and ineffective defense against the Israeli attacks are some examples of the delegitimization sub-category as they are factors making citizens question a regime’s legitimacy. On the contrary, posts praising the president, attributing wisdom to the state and its decisions, and hence, the necessity of people’s obedience were interpreted as instances of legitimization sub-category as they produce a common theme of legitimizing the state/regime and its right to rule. Both sub-categories share a common theme, that is, legitimacy (of the political actor in question).

Our approach is similar to Subotic (2016), who, using Schematic Templates, analyzed the general structure of narratives in her study of state autobiographical narratives and political actions. Specifically, we looked at the general structure of Facebook narratives, not particular instances per se or the number of times such attributes were used. In other words, we tried to detect how complexly these narratives were used by describing different ontological (in)securities and richly detailing them. For example, our analysis showed that all attributes describing the “legitimacy” sub-category are centered around one notion, the personal cult of the president, whereas attributes describing the “delegitimacy” sub-category can be grouped into three distinct themes: failed political regime,

**Table 2.** Thematic analysis of the emerging themes.

A1: Collective Self: National Self/Syria	
Ontological security condition	Attributes
Ontological insecurity condition	Attributes
Self-esteem, meaningfulness	<b>proudly</b> espouses <b>Pan-Arabism</b> through (or by) the ruling party, <b>Ba'ath</b> Party.
Agency, self-esteem	<b>Fights bravely</b> others/enemies
	Is <b>dead</b> because of <b>mysterious</b> reasons
	Is <b>immoral</b> at the <b>social level</b> (as Syrians are immoral people).
	Is <b>irresponsible</b> at the <b>political level</b> (as the people are irresponsible citizens).
	<b>Resists nothing</b> / its resistance is an illusion or a lie.
	Represents the <b>Arabic world</b> as <b>backward</b> (which contradicts the Ba'athist ideology)
A2: Collective Self: Local Self/Salamieh	
Ontological security condition	Attributes
Ontological insecurity condition	Attributes
Self-esteem, agency, meaningfulness	<b>Achieves/asserts education</b> (thanks to the Aga Khan III -hence, Ismaili thought—and current students)
Meaningfulness, continuity	Is <b>tolerant</b>
Agency	Is a hub of <b>development</b>
Continuity, self-esteem	Has a <b>great past</b> , <b>expresses nostalgia to this past</b> —at the social and everyday level—and to the Fatimid empire.

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

B1: Power Relations: The Army			
Ontological security condition	Attributes	Ontological insecurity condition	Attributes
Self-esteem, agency	Is <b>devoted</b> /honest because of its <b>sacrifices</b> (in spite of the state's impoverishment of the army)		
Meaningfulness	<b>Protects</b> the Arabic Ummah		
Self-esteem	Is <b>powerful/hero</b> —because of defeating the opposition		
B2: Power Relations: The State			
Ontological security condition	Attributes	Ontological insecurity condition	Attributes
		Meaninglessness	Is <b>bad</b> as it <b>exploits</b> the <b>army</b>
		Agentlessness	Performs <b>bad economy</b>
		Agentlessness	<b>Defers</b> its economic <b>responsibility</b> by making <b>timeless promises</b>
		Agentlessness, self-denigration	<b>Cowardly defers</b> its <b>duty</b> to face Israel by <b>timeless promises/ shamed</b> in front of Israel
		Meaninglessness, Agentlessness	Is <b>weak</b> in front of its <b>own Paramilitary</b>

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued)

C1: Legitimization/delegitimization of the state/national Self

Ontological security condition (legitimization)	Attribute	Ontological insecurity condition (delegitimization)	Attribute
Meaningfulness	Is actualized by the <b>personal cult</b> of the president	Meaninglessness, self-denigration	Is due to the <b>failed political regime</b> (because of political <b>institutions</b> and the Ba'athist <b>ideology</b> )
		Meaninglessness	Is due to the <b>absence of social contract</b> (rooted in the nature of the state-nation formation)
		Agentlessness	Is due to <b>bad governance</b> (rooted in the administrative/bureaucratic level and economic performance)

absence of social contract, and bad governance, each referring to an ontological (in) security condition.

The boundary between thickness and thinness is an ad hoc boundary and may differ according to the purpose of the study. To operationalize narrative thickness/thinness, we relied on the discourse complexity literature, which has been widely applied in cognitive sciences (Spooren and Sanders, 2008), in International Relations to analyze leaders' decision-making and discourses (e.g. Suedfeld, 2010; Suedfeld and Tetlock, 1977), in political communication (e.g. Tolochko and Boomgaarden, 2019), and in comparative politics (e.g. on deliberative democracy, see Jaramillo and Steiner, 2014). Drawing on this literature, thick narrative is a complex narrative with multiple dimensions of meanings, whereas thin narrative is simple with fewer dimensions. We observed multiplicity/simplicity by looking at the group of attributes associated with each sub-category we found in the first stage of our analysis (the thematic analysis). For example, the narrative of the "delegitimacy" sub-category is thicker than its counterpart, the narrative of the "legitimacy" sub-category, because the former has three (thematic) groups of attributes, whereas the latter has only one group of attributes (see Table 2).

## Salamieh's war narrative

### *The collective self*

A war narrative aims to re-shape the collective Self by changing its values and meaning-system, thereby motivating it for violence. The collective Self in the Facebook pages analyzed here was either the national Self or the local Self. Both differ in their spatial and temporal features: while the former refers to Syria since independence in 1946, the latter refers to the small city of Salamieh that dates back to 1848 with its globally spread Ismaili identity.

Regarding the identity content, both pro-regime and neutral pages presented a strong and clear core attribute of the national Self, which is the pan-Arabist or Ba'athist ideology, from which all other values and meanings are derived. The national Self is narrated as the heart of the Arabic World as it seeks to unify it, maintain Arab dignity, and protect against the impending death menacing this imagined nation or *Ummah*. This core attribute, which provides the national Self with a clear definition and demarcation of home (the *Ummah* and its inhabited land), has been actualized by Syria's ruling party, the Ba'ath Party, which has been in power since 1963. A post from Salamieh al-Hadath (April 2019) argued that the war against Syria was also targeting the Ba'ath party and its principles. Another post from the same page (February 2019) stated the following:

The Ba'ath party is interwoven into our society, and it has sacrificed to keep our home and the Arab Ummah [nation] protected [. . .] we will march behind our Leader, the Leader of the Party, the Arab Leader, the great Bashar Assad, to whom we sacrifice our souls.

This content's attribute (pan-Arabism) immediately invokes enemy Others to be resisted. Consequently, neither home nor a positive self-image can exist independently from a thick boundary-system that classifies many Others as essential enemies, as suggested by the following post from Salamieh Huna (October 2019):



This [what is happening in Syria] is not a revolution, it is a plot woven by the Zionists and the imperialists against Syria. What is the substitute for the regime? Islamists? Wahabi movements? the Muslim Brotherhood? Those who have left the country and called for democracy are nothing but sons of wh\*\*es.

The Other against which the national Self stands varies greatly. It commonly means the Arabian Gulf, which was stigmatized as an oil-rich, spoiled region, and the Trump Administration, to which the Syrian people taught values of resistance and dignity. Even the 2021 Syrian presidential election was narrated as a resistance against enemies. Moreover, when the boundary-system welcomed an Other as a “friend,” this friendship was celebrated as an allegiance to fight the same enemy Others. For example, when a crisis erupted in the Gaza Strip in 2021 between Israel and Hamas, Salamieh Huna celebrated the cooperation between Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas as the only actual coalition to protect Palestine (May 2021).

As seen in these examples, some Facebook posts presented an ontologically secure national Self by endowing it with self-esteem granted by heroic fighting for the Ummah, with agency stemming from the ability to resist the Other(s), clear meaning boundaries, defining who the national Self is, and a demarcated home where the Self dwells (ideally the Arab world). However, these narratives are very thin, characterized by few attributes that are rigid and based on othering (see Table 2).

The only oppositional Facebook page in the sample also used a thin narrative to represent the national Self as ontologically secure. That is, the identity’s content was shallow and did not exceed the glorified revolution that generates self-esteem, leaving us without a clear idea about what the Syrian Self and its attributes are. For the opposition, an ontologically secure Self is only to be against the brutal regime. This is a very thin and unidimensional content. A post from the Media Body of Salamieh and its Suburb, the oppositional page, showed a video of a masked man in Salamieh holding a revolution flag that reads, “Viva Syria, down with the Assad family,” (June 2020), in addition to many other posts showing photos of crying children to accentuate the regime’s “brutality” (January 2020). This Facebook page sometimes tried to frame “the revolution” as a movement toward democracy and peaceful ethnic coexistence, but without explaining further what this is and how it could be achieved. This thinness in narrating the identity derives—at least partly—from a very rigid boundary-system: the Self actualizes its identity by being anti-Other—an identity that defines who belongs and who does not. Although this way of narrating provides the national Self with ontological security by producing a clear meaning-system (insiders vs outsiders), self-esteem (by attributing heroism to the Self), and a sense of agency (resistance against multiple Others) and belonging to home (Arab land or the Ummah), it shows that this security is maintained only by few elements that the Self withholds vehemently.

Further analysis shows that the neutral and pro-regime pages also present the national Self as ontologically *insecure*, and this representation was *thickly* narrated. The national Self was narrated as weak, sick, and humiliated, signifying a lack of agency and self-denigration, and hence, ontological insecurity since the Self cannot claim ontological security when it cannot hold a self-respected meaning-system and when it perceives itself as unable to act (i.e. agentless) in the world as it desires due to illness, lack of power

and respect. A post from Salamieh Wikileaks (June 2019) went further by using abstract and metaphorical expressions to represent the death of the national Self. This metaphorical death denotes a meaningless Self, which begets ontological insecurity:

Firstly, we need to mercifully bury Syrian national dignity, which is dead amidst hatred and greed, but no one wants to bury it . . . Death, poverty, and damage haunt every Syrian now.

Such a narrative of ontological insecurity was deepened by attributing this death to immorality plaguing the national Self and the people, Syrians, themselves, which further emphasizes self-denigration. The following post from Salamieh Ehbaria reads (May 2019):

After the last earthquake in Japan, people returned to police centers huge amounts of money that they found in corpses' pockets. If that [earthquake] happened in our country, only stealing would thrive.

Other posts blamed ordinary Syrians as well as the political regime for the country's festering situation. For example, participation in the 2021 presidential election was widely rebuked by citing proverbs like "A people who re-elects its thieves . . . is not a victim but a participant in the crime" (Qamous Salamna Group, May 2021). The quote explicitly presents self-denigration by arguing that it is the people themselves who have created this miserable situation; thus, they deserve their suffering.

The most surprising themes emerged from the pro-regime pages, such as Salamieh al-Hadath (January 2019), and other pages that frequently and strongly advocated Ba'ath ideology, such as Bari Sharqi (February 2020). They mocked Arabs, describing them as backward. This established a narrative contradicting pan-Arabism by picturing Arabs as worthless people rather than a great Ummah to be unified and to die for (as the Ba'athist ideology implies). While Arabs were considered to be a worthless nation, the Ba'athist ideology which relied on pan-Arabism had to be supported and even had to be died for. As seen, this representation presents an inconsistent picture of the Collective Self, which both subverts the meaning-system of the national Self and demonstrates its unworthy home (the Ummah and the Arab World). Such an inconsistent picture of the Self which lacks meaning and belonging presents an ontological insecurity.

In contrast to these narratives of the national Self, almost all Facebook pages narrated the local Self as ontologically secure through various images and statements about Ismaili identity and local society. For example, they represented Salamieh City as a pioneer in education since the early 20th century, thanks to the guidance and support of the 48th Imam of the Ismailis, Aga Khan III. This "legacy" of maintaining high levels of education was stressed during the war not only as a product of Ismailism but also because of the courage of the students themselves. A post in Qamous Salamna, for example, stated that the city's students always proved their intelligence despite all difficulties (July 2021).

Education refers to the value of knowledge, self-esteem, and agency of the local Self, thus, can be a means for ontological security. Salamieh city, the home of the local Self, also becomes a source of pride for its residents by providing them with a high level of

education. Other values and attributes were narrated to construct the local Self, and its strong meaning-system, by referring to the 49th Imam's (the Aga Khan IV) ideas and Ismaili thought. For example, a post in July 2019 from Salamieh Wikileaks read, "The Imam is a person who works for all, regardless of their religion, race . . .," while a December 2019 post from Salamieh Ehbaria stated, "They [unclear reference] kindle war, we [Ismailis with a photo of the Aga Khan IV] kindle peace." Finally, Salamieh 24 (July 2019) declared, "hell and heaven are here [on earth]; every time we love we enter heaven [a common belief in Ismailism]." Many pages also narrated other attributes supporting ontological security conditions, such as nostalgia for the Fatimid Empire, whose founder started his campaign from Salamieh 1000 years ago (showing the local Self's consistency over time), and celebration of the cooperative atmosphere between people in the past and present. Since these narratives use various distinctive attributes of how Salamieh city, as a home, is a source of meaning, self-esteem, agency, and belonging for its residents, local Self's state of ontological security is presented thickly.

On the contrary, all pages narrating the local Self as ontologically insecure used thin narratives. Bad events, alluding to immorality and meaninglessness, were frequently attributed to the bad government, the paramilitaries, or the bad behavior of a few people who were reared in fragile families. However, they were never attributed to the people of Salamieh, their customs, or the city's social structure; rather, they were presented as isolated cases and attributed to few people. For example, Qamous Salamna Group represented a youth gang called 102 as an isolated case that could be easily curbed by local people (July 2021). These pages used very few attributes in describing the events/factors triggering ontological insecurity of the local Self, leading to a conclusion that the pages used thin narratives about it.

In sum, the analysis (see Table 2) shows that Facebook pages thickly narrated the local Self in Salamieh as ontologically secure, whereas the national Self was narrated thickly as ontologically insecure. On the contrary, these pages thinly narrated the local Self's ontological insecurity and the national Self's ontological security.

### **Power relations**

Power relations in the Facebook pages included discussions about relations between many actors, but predominantly those between the state and the military (both objects of the national Self). It is worth noting that it is rather difficult to specify what many posts meant by "state." They sometimes referred to the government, nation-state, the president, army, or all these elements together when they mentioned the state as an actor, which can be observed in non-democratic states where the boundaries between the state and the society dissolve (see Arendt, 1979). Yet, although these elements might be blurry, people, depending on their political positions, may still dissociate some state elements (e.g. the army) from others by attributing better characteristics to them while keeping the state as a unitary actor.

The army, as one face of the state, was represented in the Facebook posts as an ontologically secure image of the national Self that had been confronting the opposition (or in governmental discourse, the "terrorists") since 2011 to save the *Ummah* from falling under the control of its enemies. It is critical to ontological (in)security because it

embodies some of the state's agency through its function of protecting home both at the local and national levels, thus adding to the Self's meaning-system by keeping the citizens' consistent sense of safety. In this sense, it is the protector of the nation's physical (by protecting its citizens from attacks on their lives) and ontological security (by keeping its existence meaningful and strong). Such meaning-making is crucial in the Ba'athist sense, as the army is seen as the defender of the Ummah, the ideal home of the national Self, and the keeper of the Ba'athist ideology, which constitutes the core of the Self's identity and agency, from falling a prey to a "terrorist" agenda. As Salamieh Huna claimed (May 2019), had the army been cowardly, ISIS would have raped the city's women:

Oh civilians, listen! There is always a soldier whom you do not want to take into your car when you see him waiting by a road. Listen, thanks to this soldier, your sisters, mothers, and wives were not taken hostages to be f\*\*ed by the ISIS and the armed groups.

Some Facebook pages accentuated the value of the army without associating its heroism, (read as its agency), with a clear enemy, presenting it instead as an absolute not a relational hero, reflecting the national Self's high self-esteem and boosting its ontological security. For example, a May 2019 post from Salamieh al-Hadath narrated the dialogue below between a soldier and his son, showing proudly how soldiers protect home by sacrificing their bodies so that the next generations can continue to live peacefully:

Where are you going dad?

I am going to buy a safe night for you.

Do you have money, dad?

I will buy it with my blood.

These posts represented the army as a powerful defender of Arabs against the opposition that threatened the everyday life and the core attribute of the national Self. Although it might be perceived as representing an ontologically insecure national Self because the soldier can be seen as agentless who cannot manage his own life due to poverty, the post, in fact, presents him as a source of national pride, glory, and greatness. Martyrs' pictures and names, for example, were posted with their "proud" children, widows, and parents without any discussion of those who cry behind them. Military was also glorified for its devotion, which is "proven" by the loyalty of its members to the nation despite their poverty, as many posts stressed that soldiers were poor, tired, and fighting with muddy uniforms on, such as the Media Body of Salamieh and its Suburb, an oppositional page (December 2019). This image did not change even when the army was blamed for stealing people's furniture and houses when it seized a village. Instead, the looting was presented as a sign of poverty and high-ranking officers' corruption more than the deliberate bad actions of ordinary soldiers, whose lives were always risked in severe battles.

In most Facebook page narratives, the army was the main agent of the state protecting the national Self's state of ontological security (as the protector of the Ummah), whereas

the state was *not*. The state did not support the army since it has never cared about the poor soldiers and their demands. In 2019 and 2020, campaigns on Facebook spread widely, imploring the state to end obligatory military service because soldiers were tired and needed to support their families (e.g. Salamieh Ehbaria, June 2020).

Many posts also showed the economic difficulties Syrians face and blamed the state/government for bad economic performance. As Salamieh Ehbaria put it, “all people now think of suicide” (January 2020), while Qamous Salamna (July 2021) protested poverty by arguing that rises in bread price mean that people cannot dream of anything and will be buried in long rows waiting for their basic needs. These posts present an image of agentless national Self since the people mentioned in the posts have lost control over their lives. This example is different than the dialogue between the soldier and his kid above since the poverty presented in these posts portrayed people without a control of their lives, whereas the “poor” soldier above is portrayed as one making a dignified choice to defend the nation and bring home safety in return.

Some posts also blamed international actors (e.g. the United States, European Union, and Turkey) for imposing an economic embargo on Syria. These actors were represented as powerful enough to damage Syria’s economy, while the people, not the state, were called on to resist them by bearing poverty because resistance implies dignity as an attempt to save the image of the state, which again shows that an agentless and weak state, one of whose main responsibilities is to protect its citizens, fails to do so.

Other posts, however, showed direct support for the state’s agency by promising that the state would “soon” improve economic performance. In March 2021, for example, when the exchange rate for the Syrian Lira against the US dollar reached over 3500, Bari Sharqi promised that it would drop to 1500 soon, although it never did. Similarly, Bari Sharqi declared in July 2021 that the state’s anti-corruption measures would improve the economy in the future. While these posts claim power, they in fact *defer* actions to the future by asking people to wait as the actions taken by the state will later prove effective, raising question marks about the state’s agency, thus the ontological security of the national Self.

Another aspect of the state’s deferral is its hostile relations with Israel. In April 2021, a short war erupted between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Many Facebook pages claimed that the Syrian state was responsible for supporting Hamas against Israel. Salamieh al-Hadath (July 2021) went further by stating that Assad had metaphorically struck Israel from Damascus. The national Self borrows its “actions” from another actor, Hamas, thereby avoiding a direct action against Israel. Such avoidance and deferrals of actions to other actors are signs of weak agency since they imply that the state is not powerful enough to act against its enemies.

In sum, the Facebook pages mostly represented Syria’s army as a source of ontological security through a thick narrative (e.g. by emphasizing its self-esteem and agency), whereas they mostly represented the state as agentless and self-denigrated, thus ontologically insecure through a thick narrative. Besides agentlessness and self-denigration, inconsistency plagued the Self: the state is expected to empower the army as the symbol of the national Self, but it does the opposite. These narratives about the state also show an inconsistency, which weakens its meaning-system and generates a state of ontological insecurity.

## Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an actor's *right* to use its power, shape social life, and be supported by those who are less powerful (Kratochwil, 2006). When actors are delegitimized, they lose their right to use their power even if they remain powerful. In terms of ontological security, state legitimacy refers to belonging to a collective identity with a clear and embraced meaning-system or ideology (Kinnvall, 2019). Hence, lacking legitimacy engenders an ontological insecurity because it implies flaws in both belonging to the collective and its meaning-system. Delegitimacy also assigns self-denigration and non-authenticity to the collective Self since its members perceive the collective as unworthy to belong to and defend. Consequently, delegitimacy also weakens the Self's sense of belonging to home since it no longer provides a pleasant place to be part of.

Facebook narratives legitimizing the state focused on President Bashar Assad's personality. This legitimacy is rooted in the previous president, his father. For example, posts from Salamieh Huna (February 2019) and Salamieh al-Hadath (June 2019) glorified Hafez Assad as the Arabic world's greatest man, the leader, the founder, eternal in people's hearts. Such statements imply that people must unquestioningly trust every decision the President makes, as the future will prove his wisdom. Many people criticized the government's 2019 decision to lease Tartus Port to a Russian company as an action akin to "selling the home." The following pro-regime post responded to this criticism, illustrating how legitimacy is centered only around the president (Bari Sharqi, May 2019):

After the decision of renting the Port to Russia, swarms of ravens started to voice badly. O stupid! This is a way to avert the severe economic sanctions. All the states' ports are run by private companies. And do not think that our "leadership" [presidency] would make this decision if it were not useful for the people and our home. Our trust in our leadership/presidency is great. The coming days will prove that. May Allah protect and take care of my lord, the president.

Whereas the state was only legitimized through the personal cult of the president using a thin narrative, its delegitimization was thickly narrated in various ways, veering between criticizing the genuineness, or the "soul" of the nation-state itself and Assad's bad governance and poor performance. A post from Salamieh al-Haqiqa (May 2019), a neutral page, contributed to this discussion on legitimacy by stating that the nation itself, denoted by "we," was destined to fail economically, politically, and socially because the ideology of the state had hindered establishing a good life; hence, the national Self's meanings-system was flawed by this ideology and the ensuing failure:

The reason for this war is that we failed to establish a political regime that protects our rights; we failed to make any development and properly plan the economy. All of that happened because of some ideological doctrines that prevented us from making a good life.

Another post from Qamous Salamna (June 2021) about how the state had failed for decades to build a proper university in Syria illustrates how bad governance delegitimizes the state, pointing to its lack of agency, as it failed to provide infrastructure to its



citizens and making the national home, Syria, unworthy to live in. In sum, these posts show that ontological insecurity grounded in thick and rich narration of delegitimacy has engulfed the national Self.

The next section presents some conclusions from the above analysis and discusses thick narrative as an ontological SSS.

## **Discussion: thick narratives as an ontological SSS**

The analysis above demonstrates that Facebook narratives representing the national Self as ontologically insecure are thick, whereas narratives representing this Self as ontologically secure are thin. Conversely, Facebook narratives representing the local Self as ontologically secure are thick, whereas narratives representing this local Self as ontologically insecure are very thin. Given that all these narratives come mainly from pro-regime and neutral pages, *for which the national Self should be important*, these results present an interesting picture, enriching our understanding of the ways through which the collective Self seeks ontological security.

Although one would expect that the Facebook pages *could have* used only thin narratives of ontological security, the analysis showed that they did not, which begged further analysis. Given that the national Self had a choice to maintain its ontological security by using thin narratives, it is interesting to note that the Facebook posts narrated it thickly as ontologically insecure. We suggest that a collective Self deliberately uses thick narratives even though they generate anxiety and challenge the conditions of ontological security, such as consistency, meaningful content, and self-esteem. The reason for this is that a collective Self aspires to build a strong and richly meaningful narrative of itself, rather than maintain a weak or fake narrative. As discussed earlier, thick narrative generates a rich and authentic meaning-system much more than a thin narrative does. A thick narrative generates a richer meaning-system by extracting meanings from reality, analyzing them, and confronting them. By using a thick rather than a thin narrative, the Self can build a more authentic and richer identity, stronger agency, and a deeper attachment to its home. In other words, the collective Self sacrifices its ability to narrate itself as ontologically secure by using thick narratives to build an authentic and rich ontologically secure Self (perhaps over time), even if it suffers pain and anxiety (in the present).

Our argument follows that of Rumelili (2021) and Rumelili and Celik (2017), who argued that a collective Self must endure anxiety to move to ontological security. We extend this argument to include that a Collective Self uses thick narratives to conceive its meaning-system, agency, and belonging to home to endure or welcome such anxiety. Narrative form matters as does its content. The argument presented here allows us to compare the two ontological security statuses and conclude that narratives about the local Self present an ontologically more secure Self than those about the national Self because the former are thick narratives. In principle, the narrators in our analysis could have kept the ontologically secure narratives of—at least—the national Self thin. In this case, they would avoid pain; however, they did not. Our argument comes from the fact that most narratives are taken from neutral and pro-regime pages, which are assumed to strongly embrace the national Self. Hence, we assume that generating a richer authentic Self is more important than keeping a continuous and respected Self if the latter can only

be maintained through a thin narrative. In sum, Self narrates itself thickly even if this thick narrative includes an ontologically insecure content.

An actor with multiple identities, receiving different threats for each of these identities, may respond to these threats by various yet contradictory strategies. While some of these strategies may improve one identity, others may simultaneously harm other identities. These resulting contradictions create anxiety or ontological dissonance (Lupovici, 2012). Thick narratives can contribute to this process by creating ontological dissonance in the Self because the process of seeking ontological security in the presence of contradictions can turn out to be risky for the Self. Although thick narrative promises the Self a strong ground for ontological security in the future, the process itself generates questions about certain fundamentals of the Self, its agency, and a sense of belonging to home, which can cause anxiety. Nevertheless, the Self, by sticking to a thick narrative, accepts this cost, because ontological security is not maintained only through stability, such as routines and a familiar environment, but also through creativity by which the Self enjoys the discovery of what is possible in the future (Berenskötter, 2020).

The “need” for creativity is rooted in the human lust for embarking on new orders and meanings that the Self can encounter (Berenskötter, 2020). When the Self sacrifices thin but ontologically secure narratives to embrace thick but ontologically insecure narratives, it does so because thick narratives can increase the capacity of the Self to be authentic and creative. Self’s thick narrative, therefore, is a means of “mastering” this capacity even if this requires experiencing anxiety. Yet, anxiety is also paradoxical in nature (Berenskötter, 2020). The first face of this paradox is the need for creativity, propelling the individual to discover new possibilities, whereas the second face is the need for stability, igniting the individual to preserve a stable routine and meaning-system. These two needs are paradoxical because when one is met, the other is denied as the individual cannot sustain them simultaneously. When creativity is pursued, instability emerges, and when stability is maintained, creativity is curbed. Hence, ontological security is enmeshed in this paradox.

Following up on Berenskötter’s (2020) important point to pay attention to the “creativity face” of anxiety, this study raises a discussion about why people would choose an anxious process as opposed to a stable situation. Our analysis demonstrated that despite the anxiety they might encounter, people might choose to confront reality, and be at the same time open to discovering new venues to grow through creative ways. The Salamieh people, by choosing to narrate the national Self through thick narratives, might have satisfied their need for creativity and opened a wider space for understanding the Self and the world. For example, while a thin narrative of legitimization provides the national Self with ontological security, a thick narrative of delegitimization creates ontological insecurity about the national Self. Yet, a thin narrative of legitimization, limited only to the president’s legitimacy, does not create a window of opportunity for the Self to know itself and the world better, because it has very little to say about them. On the contrary, a thick narrative of delegitimization provides a rich reservoir of ideas, questions, and discoveries about reality, such as the ones about the nation’s economic performance and failure in national defense. Therefore, this thick narrative provides fertile ground for the national Self to become authentic by confronting conditions surrounding it. In doing so, it pushes the Self to free itself from an ideologically established order that is very

restraining and open to an order that is not yet fully known. This promise of what has not yet been achieved constitutes a solid ground for the Self to establish its ontological security in the future as it reflects its capacity to unearth the surrounding world and its inner realm despite the ensuing pain. Based on this discussion, our analysis calls on a reconsideration of ontological security strategy to account for the ability of a collective Self to thickly articulate its meaning-system while narrating and enjoying a strong agency in a social and material environment that constitutes its home.

## Conclusion

Syria's civil war threatens the ontological security of all Syrian residents, including the Ismaili citizens of Salamieh City who are majority in their city but a minority in Syria. In this study, we used public Facebook pages about the city to understand how they shape war narratives to deal with the emerging meanings and values, which cause contradictions within the collective Self's narratives of Salamieh's residents.

Civil wars destabilize self-narratives by subverting the meaning-system, agency, and belonging, creating anxiety for group members. As a result, narratives are produced to restore these damaged conditions, aiming at assuaging the ensuing ontological insecurity. Our analysis of the war narratives in Salamieh demonstrates that they are produced to generate possibly richer meaning-systems and an authentic Self even if they threaten the status of ontological security. Thick narratives are used to understand complex reality and generate a rich meaning-system and strong agency. Salamieh's people could, in theory, stick to thin narratives to narrate their ontological security. However, they would then lose an opportunity to generate possibly richer meanings which would open the door for a more authentic Self in the future.

These findings suggest that ontological security is a function of both the content (what) and the form (how) of narrative. Rather than avoiding reality, thick narrative provides the Self an opportunity to better know the world around it and build on this genuine knowledge to create a state of ontological security that is not yet established but will be possible in the future. Contrary to the claim that a simple Self is more ontologically secure because its narrative is easily kept continuous and routinized, this study shows that confronting reality and tolerating change despite the anxiety and pain the process generates, can provide ontological security. While the previous studies have pointed out that the Self embraces anxiety to improve or maintain its ontological security, they did not discuss possible ways to do so. This study shows that thick narrative promises a possible means of confronting pain and anxiety by allowing a space for the Self to reflect on its capacity for uncovering the surrounding world and its inner realm even under very constraining and traumatic conditions, such as living under authoritarian regimes or during wars.

Besides opening new discussions on how thick narratives become a strategy for sustaining ontological security, the findings of this study also promise new discussions in the literature on peacebuilding in civil wars. Despite the catastrophic consequences of civil wars, thick narratives can provide the Self with a possible means to reach ontological security. As such, it becomes an important means to be utilized by peacebuilders to prime a change in the self-image of warring groups and create an understanding of the

Other's reality since the process of confronting that reality, although painful, can provide the Self with a stronger identity, agency, and meaning. It can also facilitate intergroup dialogue since a Self who has a strong identity and knows how to confront different "realities" is less resistant to listening to the Other's story. In other words, infusing thick narratives into the social representation of a collective can be a useful tool to change a group's perception of the Other, drifting it away from enmity. Yet, there is still need for more research to explore why and under which conditions actors choose to narrate thickly. Exploring such questions in multiple cases can provide a deeper understanding of the conditions behind such choices.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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