Priming Assad: An Experiment of Ethnic Priming and Attitudes toward Military Action in Syria

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Americans’ low level of support for intervening in Syria presents a puzzle raising questions about how democracies approach conflict. Scholars have noted that the United States’ public may need to view opponents in conflict as different than themselves before military force is used. But what is the tipping point between perceiving someone as “one of us,” or “one of them?” Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s actions fit the model of a villain, but his appearance represents a divergence from recent leaders cast as enemies to the United States. Using a unique experiment examining citizen evaluations of the Syrian crisis, we demonstrate that subtle manipulations of Assad’s skin tone led respondents to view him more negatively and increased support for U.S. intervention to effect regime change. Respondents primed with an image of Assad with darker skin are more likely to support aggressive policies in Syria. Ethnocentric sentiment also influences attitudes toward Assad and intervention in Syria. The findings from our experiment have implications for racial stereotypes, priming, and their interactions with attitudes toward American foreign policy.

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In the fall of 2013, President Obama was considering the use of force in Syria against the government and its strongman leader, President Bashar al-Assad, and asking Congress to authorize the use of force. The administration made a case not only about Assad’s blame for the unfolding human tragedy and non-democratic regime, but also labeling him a threat to our national interest related to his use of chemical weapons. Yet, a CNN poll showed the citizenry strongly (59% to 39%) opposed Congress approving military action, even though a strong majority (8 out of 10) believed Assad had gassed his own people. Even if Congress authorized military action, 55% of Americans opposed the use of air strikes (www.cnn.com/2013/09/09/politics/syria-poll-main/).

Indeed, polls about intervention in Syria consistently and puzzlingly showed this result. An analysis of 37 American public opinion polls by Nicholas Chad Long showed a mean support level for use of force in Syria of only 34%. Clearly, such attitudes are shaped by myriad factors, including cost, perceptions about the national interest being at stake, and, Afghanistan and Iraq war induced war weariness. Yet, in 2011, as Long showed, a majority of the American public (53% average across polls) supported the use of force in Libya prior to its use (2014).

One possible partial explanation for this puzzle is that President Assad represents a divergent image from the previous leaders cast as enemies to the United States. Western-educated, urbane, sporting a modern haircut and usually a suit, Assad differs dramatically from past targets such as Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, or Muammar Gaddafi. Visually, Assad has light skin and is often pictured with his wife Asma, a blond, British citizen with Syrian roots. Assad and his wife look distinctively Western, and he does not pose for pictures in a military uniform or traditional Arab garb. In fact, they have had an American based PR company working on their image for years, (Carter and Chozik 2012), presumably believing it would affect relations with the Western world. We believe this deviance from common stereotypical images of Arab leaders increases the difficulty in framing the Syrian conflict for citizens, thus decreasing public support for military action against Syria. Accordingly, we carried out an original experiment testing the extent that Assad’s image may alter the public’s attitudes toward him and policy options for regime change in Syria. The findings from our experiment have both theoretical and practical implications relative to racial stereotypes, priming, the power of information, and attitudes toward American foreign policy.
Painting the ‘Enemy Portrait’

It is prima facie true that in democracies leaders must mobilize public support for sustained war efforts (de Mesquita et al. 2004). Put bluntly, you need the votes, tax dollars, and the services of the daughters and sons, husbands and wives, and “selves” of the voters. Selling the war should ideally be done before engaging in conflict; indeed, in an effort to create a war fervor, presidents have often portrayed their proposed targets as different than their own society and as menacing, threatening, and even perhaps evil.

A good recent exploration of this by Paul R. Pillar (2013) suggests that current U.S. attitudes toward Iran need to be studied in the context of “the historically based American way of looking at foreign adversaries.” And, that Americans perceive of conflicts in a Manichean way, with the U.S. playing the role of good guy versus a demonized, evil adversary (p. 217). Comparisons of Saddam Hussein to Hitler were made before military force was used in the first Persian Gulf War, exemplifying the tendency of Presidents to invoke threats to our national security to garner support. As Pillar points out, this painting of an opponent as evil via analogy to Hitler is not new or different; portraying the conflict in these terms, rather than a mere conflict of interests makes citizens feel better about our role, the costs of the conflict, and its necessity. Indeed, “(t)he need for a villain is a matter of public psychology and, because of that, also a matter of politics” (p. 218).

As Erik Gartzke and Alex Weisiger recently argued on the need to think about democratic peace as conditional, “difference provides the basis for conflict and serves to define the realm where force becomes an option” (2013). Further, research about kinship and in-group/out-group biases suggests that not only does in-group/out-group bias lead to negative and derogatory views about out-groups, but “an even stronger tendency towards favoritism of the in-group” (Forsyth 1999). Perceiving other leaders and countries as different would seem to be a necessary condition for democracies to engage in military conflict.

Concomitantly, racial priming research in the U.S. has long found that the automatic and implicit nature of racial stereotypes can unconsciously alter how people feel about a host of public policies. Research on race and criminal justice has shown that simply the darkness or the shade of an African American’s skin can predict the severity of the sentence by jurors and judges. (e.g., Viglione et al, 2011, Hochschild 2006, Maddox and Gray 2002, Hunter 1998). Such work on what some have called “colorism” (Banks 2008) suggests that the impact of darker versus lighter skin tone within racial/ethnic groups also affects outcomes and “may not be the result of conscious bias,
but of what Jerry Kang calls ‘racial mechanics—the way in which race alters intrapersonal, interpersonal, and inter-group interactions’” (Banks, p. 215).

**Foreign Policy, Democracy, and Villains**

While experts debate the impact of public opinion on foreign policy, there is no debate that public support for both specific policies and broad national efforts can change as the understanding of what is at stake changes. Gabriel Almond noted, long ago, that surveys after the Sputnik shock supported higher taxes and tougher education standards (1968, p. xxiii). Additionally, Seymour M. Lipset (1966, p. 20) suggests that presidents do not follow public opinion, but rather shape it.

The idea that the public mood might swing dramatically from an all out morality-infused mission in support of war (perhaps to end war), to support for near isolationism (e.g., John Spanier, pp. 17-18), has been challenged by recent scholarship (which also questions the ability of the president to manipulate the public’s support, (e.g., Page and Shapiro, 1988; and Jentleson, 1992). In the United States, Presidential failure to whip up appropriate support for use of our military would be seen as a virtual dereliction of duty. The Weinberger Doctrine’s fifth test, that must be met before troops could be put in harm’s way, is that there must be “reasonable assurance” that they would have the support of the public and their representatives in Congress. (Hook, 2005, p. 307). To wit, President George W. Bush not only discussed Hussein’s using chemical weapons against his own people (the Kurds), but referencing Hitler and World War Two, saying “[a]ppeasement does not work. As was the case in the 1930s, we see in Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator threatening his neighbors” (Address 1990). Clearly the point was to paint a picture of Hussein as being a threat to the national interest like the evil regime of Hitler. Psychology is politics. Without this, efforts to mobilize public support would simply ring hollow.

**Priming and Public Opinion**

How might the distinctiveness of Assad from recent foreign policy villains, with his “in-group” look, alter public opinion toward intervention in Syria? A substantial body of research on priming in political science and psychology has noted the power that priming of attitudes has on attitudes. For our purposes, we consider the most general definition: “priming refers to changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, p. 63). The more a consideration is emphasized by the media or in elite rhetoric, the greater the weight a consideration is given. Additionally, the consideration becomes more accessible in memory. This
heightened accessibility increases the likelihood that when being asked to evaluate an object, associated notions will shape individual perceptions. The power of priming in shaping opinion on issues is supported by research in the laboratory (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and in the ‘real world’ (Druckman 2004; Krosnick and Kinder 1990).

Priming may be either explicit or implicit in nature. In the explicit model of priming, cues are presented overtly, with considerations being raised memory consciously. Explicit priming is the conventional way to consider the effects of cues on opinion. However, not all cues are overt, and researchers have found that implicit priming may trigger attitudes subconsciously, and be a powerful determinant of attitudes and behavior (see Bargh 1999 for example). The difference in the operative mechanism is that, while implicit primes make considerations accessible, they do so subconsciously, using imagery, or carefully coded language meant to evoke such controversial considerations. This subtler form of activation prevents individuals from counteracting their effects and rejecting considerations with which they would otherwise disagree, leading to unconsciously biased judgments.

Given our interest in opinion on conflict in the Middle East, we are particularly interested in the way priming racial and ethnic stereotypes may alter public opinion. In American politics, the centrality of racial attitudes and priming to a host of public policies provides us with a platform to understand Assad and Syria. The mere mention of issues that have acquired associations with social groups (for example, crime or welfare have become associated with race) can invoke stereotypical associations, biasing individuals’ issue opinions (Hurwitz and Peffley 1997, 2005; Peffley and Hurwitz 2002; Peffley et al. 1997). Racial cues may be embedded in political rhetoric, media, and advertising (Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Valentino et al. 2002).

Race, and stereotypes may also be primed through the use of crafted imagery (Valentino et al. 2002). One of the most prominent examples of this is Mendelberg’s study of racial priming in the 1988 Presidential election (2001). The simple use of a racialized image in the infamous ‘Willie Horton ad,’ Mendelberg argues, was sufficient to prime racial resentment implicitly among citizens, decreasing individuals’ support for Dukakis relative to Bush. Across a number of dimensions, the common thread is that racial primes have dramatic effects on individual perceptions (Mendelberg 2008a, 2008b).
Race, Stereotypes, and Ethnocentrism

The ability of elites and the media to prime considerations of race has an important impact on how citizens have come to think about society generally, and politics specifically. It is impossible to credibly argue that race does not impact people’s socioeconomic status, educational attainment, employment outcomes, and experiences in the justice system (Viglione, Hannon, DeFina 2011). Mendelberg (2008) notes that, “Dozens of studies, conducted with surveys, lab experiments, or observational methods, have found that white Americans’ political preferences are shaped by predispositions that characterize African Americans as lazy, welfare-dependent, violent, or demanding special favors” (2008, p. 109). Feelings of group attachment, acceptance of negative stereotypes and prejudices about others, and the like lead juries, judges, voters, and policy makers to believe some groups to be more or less trustworthy, lazy, violent, intelligent, and “other.” Studies on social capital and trust (e.g., Glaeser, Laibson, Sheinkman, and Soutter, 2000, p. 811) have also found that “(t)rustworthiness declines when partners are of different races or nationalities.”

While our research concerns attitudes tied to Middle East, the underlying process should parallel the central framework used to analyze racial conceptions in domestic politics. This is doubly important to the extent that people of Middle Eastern descent (whether categorized as Muslim Americans, Arab Americans, or Middle Easterners) carry with them negative stereotypes. Sides and Gross (2013) find that negative stereotypes of Muslims, particularly those regarding violence and extremism are quite common. More importantly, these stereotypes affect how white Americans view the War on Terror and policies in the Middle East. Not only are Muslims viewed as more violent and untrustworthy, individuals are less likely to view their own group’s goals as compatible with Muslim people. For Sides and Gross, these perceptions are unsurprising given the portrayal of Muslims and Middle Easterners in popular culture and news media (2013, p. 585).

Stereotypical thinking may be specific, focused upon a particular social group, but it may also be exemplary of more general hostility. As Kinder and Kam (2009) have found, for some Americans, group stereotypes lead to an “us against them” mentality described as ethnocentrism. Ethnocentric thinking has been shown to impact a number of policy domains, including welfare spending, immigration, and importantly for our purposes, the war on terror. Such thinking is driven by a perceived extreme division between one’s own in-group and all other out-groups.1

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1 We consider the effects of ethnocentrism rather than stereotypes toward Middle Easterners due to the nature of Assad’s image and the treatment manipulation. We believe that, part of the puzzle of why Americans hold the beliefs
Our knowledge of the need to mobilize support for intervention by defining the enemy as different – as the other, and the substantial research on implicit priming, leads us to expect that Assad’s distinctive Western features may condition American attitudes toward Assad and Syrian intervention. Specifically, Assad’s light skin could feasibly make Americans less likely to view him as a threat and less likely to support forceful measures of intervention in Syria. Which leads to an important question: if he had a more stereotypical Middle Eastern features look; that is, if he had darker skin, would Americans perceive him and the prospect of American prospects for intervention differently?

Together, these considerations, these facts, and knowing the power of images in priming suggests that Assad’s distinctive uncharacteristic media image and light skin make him seem less threatening, less other, and therefore a tougher sell as a worthy enemy and villain than he would have otherwise seemed. To test this we began examining attitudes toward Assad by narrowing our focus and manipulating a single feature: skin tone. Our study utilized a list of increasingly severe policy options that could be used to effect regime change, as well as a number of measures related to trust and attachment, to measure any potential impact from the prime. Respondents primed by showing Assad with darker skin (more stereotypically non-Western) were more likely to view him as less one of us or a threat, and were, indeed, more likely to support actions leading to regime change.

Data and Methods

To test whether Assad’s skin tone alters attitudes toward Assad and military intervention, we conducted an original experiment. Respondents were asked to read a newspaper article on the conflict in Syria. Respondents were randomly shown the control article (with Assad’s official photo unaltered) or the treatment article (with Assad’s skin tone darkened using Photoshop). The stories were identical in every other aspect (See Appendix B). The fake news article contained a factual summary of the crisis in Syria since the Arab Spring and the denunciation of Assad by the U.S. The darkening of Assad’s skin should operate as an implicit prime embedded in the news story.

After reading the article, respondents were asked a battery of questions about their support for possible policy actions in U.S. intervention, ranging from sanctions to intervention with U.S.

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2 Survey instrument and study design was approved by the Institutional Review Board of a Midwestern university.
troops (See Appendix A for batteries). While policy support for intervention may largely be driven by war weariness and a general non-interventionist mood of the American public, we also crafted a battery to explore how the treatment might alter how people personally evaluate Assad on whether he is “like us” and whether he could be a potential ally. The batteries allow us to examine whether Assad’s light skin tone might alter how Americans perceive him as a threat or as trustworthy personally, as well as whether policy preference toward Syrian may also vary.

In addition to the experimental manipulation, we also measured subjects stereotypes and affect toward a number of groups in society, including Middle Easterners, which we believe may serve as a moderating factor with respect to the treatment. Subjects were asked to complete a semantic differential scale as to whether typical group members were generally violent or peaceful, as well as asked to place the group on a feeling thermometer.³

Our main hypothesis is that individuals in the treatment group will be more likely to view Assad personally negatively and will be more likely to favor aggressive intervention in Syria. Additionally, we believe that subjects with greater negative stereotypes toward Middle Easterners, or who are higher in ethnocentrism (as measured by Kinder and Kam (2009) will be more responsive to the treatment. In other words, for respondents who hold negative attitudes toward Middle Easterners, seeing the treatment of Assad with darker skin will have more influence on their attitudes toward intervention and Assad.

Survey Design

The study consisted of a between-subjects design fielded on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The sample consists of 369 respondents who completed the entire survey.⁴ Subjects were randomly assigned to either the treatment or control, and asked to initially read a faux, but factual, newspaper article about events in Syria (See Appendix C for full text of article). Both treatment and control articles contained an image of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which comprised our manipulation. Following the article, all subjects were asked to complete two batteries – one asking their support for a series of actions to remove Assad from power, and a second asking them to

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³ In addition to Middle Easterners, respondents were asked to evaluate Whites, Asians, Latinos, and African Americans. For both the stereotype and affect batteries, the groups were presented in random order.

⁴ Data collection occurred in two waves: the first from March 10-13, and the second from March 16-29. The samples were comparable across relevant demographic characteristics and thus we pool them for purposes of all presented analyses.
ascribe particular traits to Assad. The batteries were randomly presented to subjects, and items within each battery were also randomized. Full question wording appears in the appendix. Following these batteries, subjects were asked to complete a brief demographic battery (which included the stereotype and affect measures) at the end of the survey.5

Mechanical Turk (henceforth MTurk) has recently risen to prominence as a source for scholarly research that allows researchers to move beyond the prototypical “college sophomore” student samples. While MTurk participants self-select into the pool, and have the ability to opt in to or out of any task they choose, analyses of the population has found them to be more representative of the national population than other internet samples (Berinsky et al. 2012; Buhmeister et al. 2011). More importantly, studies using MTurk samples have also been able to replicate findings based upon more representative samples (Goodman et al. 2013), suggesting it is a viable resource for scholars seeking to conduct behavioral studies.6

Analysis

To examine the effects of the manipulation and group perceptions on attitudes toward Assad and support for action against Syria, we create additive indexes for each of the two batteries. We do so, rather than analyzing the items individually to avoid potential biases due to making multiple comparisons (Gelman et al. 2012). The six items are added together and the final measure is rescaled to run from 1 (most positive) to 7 (least positive) for the trait scale, and least supportive to most supportive for the possibility of taking action against Assad. As an initial test of our first hypothesis, we examine differences of means for each of the above scales, by experimental condition. These differences are shown in Table 1.

5 We acknowledge the possibility that measuring group sentiments after the experimental manipulation could potentially contaminate our measurement of these items. We argue that they occur far enough from the treatment manipulation that such concerns are minimal, and measuring them prior to the treatment would have raised larger concerns of biasing subjects’ responses to the manipulation by priming group stereotypes. A difference-of-means test of group stereotypes shows that only attitudes toward Middle Easterners are affected by the treatment, with those in the treatment condition being slightly (but significantly) more positively disposed toward the group. Results do not differ if we include or exclude this measure, and thus we include it in all presented analyses.

6 Our sample is 76% white, 7% African American, 3% Latino, 11% Asian, 61% male, 57% Democratic (including leaners), and 17% Republican (including leaners).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perceptions of Assad</th>
<th>Action Against Assad</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>5.59 (0.07)</td>
<td>3.76 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>5.41 (0.08)</td>
<td>3.47 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>0.18+ (0.11)</td>
<td>0.29* (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cell values are means with standard errors in parentheses. DV: 1 (positive perceptions of Assad/oppose removing Assad) to 7 (negative perceptions of Assad/support removing Assad). + p<0.10; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01.

Overall, we see that sentiments toward Assad are fairly negative regardless of the treatment condition. Given the facts presented in the article anything other than negative views would have been very surprising. When asked to ascribe positive traits to Assad, subjects seem to universally disagree (or refuse to agree with respect to the two positively valenced items). Despite this, we do see moderate support for our hypothesis; subjects in the treatment condition view Assad slightly more negatively (although the effect only approaches conventional levels of significance).

Similarly, support for taking action against Assad is fairly low across both conditions. Subjects, on average, are somewhat opposed to the US taking any form of action against Assad. It is interesting however, that support for taking action is so low given how negatively subjects’ perceptions of Assad are. Additionally, we see that the treatment had the expected effect. Those subjects who were exposed to the manipulated image of Assad are significantly more supportive (or perhaps less opposed) to acting against Assad than those in the control group.

Such effects are quite striking. While the effects themselves may be modest in size, we may attribute that at least in part to floor and ceiling effects for the different outcomes. Subjects were, regardless of any manipulation, unlikely to be positively disposed toward Assad, nor given factors such as the public’s war weariness would they be eager to approve of further US involvement overseas. That we see any movement at all speaks to the power of stereotypes in the mind. Yet it is somewhat troubling that such a subtle manipulation was able to move people in a discernible way though it supports our theoretical premise, that Assad’s counter-stereotypical appearance may be systematically influencing how the public perceives both him and the conflict in Syria. It is also worth noting that it would be normatively disturbing if the subtle treatment dramatically shifted opinion across our scales.
**Moderators of Priming Effects**

Moving forward, we consider what is driving these perceptual biases? Are the effects consistent across all individuals, or are they stronger amongst some than others? The literature in stereotype priming, and more recently, work on ethnocentrism suggests that individuals’ views of groups in society may serve as a moderator of these types of appeals, enhancing the effects for some, and diminishing them for others, as described in our second hypothesis. To systematically test whether these views affect willingness to act against Assad, as well as how individuals perceive him, we included a measure of individuals’ ethnocentric orientations in regression models alongside the treatment measure.

The measure of ethnocentrism is calculated using the aforementioned semantic-differential stereotype item describing whether typical group members are viewed as violent or peaceful.\(^7\) As per guidance from the work of Kinder and Kam, subjects’ in-group ratings on the stereotype and feeling thermometer items were subtracted from the average for their ratings of the out-groups. Negative values indicate a preference for out-groups over one’s in-group, while positive values indicate preference for one’s in-group over all out-groups.\(^8\) We begin by considering the independent effects of ethnocentrism alongside the treatment in influencing perceptions of Assad and support for taking action against him before moving to a systematic test of our second expectation by including an interaction term between ethnocentrism and the treatment indicator. These results are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Perceptions of Assad</th>
<th>Action Against Assad</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Treatment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.31*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentrism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentrism</td>
<td>1.26**</td>
<td>0.94**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.36)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment x Ethnocentrism</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>358</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^7\) Subjects were asked to evaluate Whites, African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Middle Easterners on the stereotype item. Groups were presented in random order.

\(^8\) Calculating ethnocentrism in this manner does necessitate omitting a small subset of subjects for whom we did not measure in-group stereotypes. This total includes 6 respondents who identified as Native American and 4 who identified themselves as ‘Other.’
The results for the simple models controlling for ethnocentrism are quite clear. For both perceptions of Assad and support for taking action against Syria, even accounting for ethnocentric beliefs derived from stereotypes of other groups, the treatment still increases negative perceptions of, and support for, taking action against Assad. It should also be noted that the measure of ethnocentrism is also positive and significant, suggesting that, on average, more ethnocentric subjects also see Assad more negatively and are more willing to take action against him. On its face, this could be seen as somewhat surprising, given that Assad does not have the image of the stereotypical Middle Easterner or Muslim. In other words, ethnocentrism could be thought to not trigger with Assad the way they might with more stereotypical images of Middle Eastern men. Yet we see that many subjects do in fact perceive him as an outsider, and are accordingly more willing to express negativity and endorse hostility.9

Having demonstrated that ethnocentrism has its own independent effect on judgments of Assad and Syria, we turn next to consider whether ethnocentric beliefs moderate responses to the treatment. As previous research examining stereotypes and priming suggests, treatment effects may be conditioned by explicit beliefs. While the work in ethnocentrism is largely observational, we believed it was likely that ethnocentrism may, similarly to stereotypes, condition responses to unconscious primes. We would expect that negative group sentiments would lead subjects to respond differently to the treatment than those with positive group sentiments. As a test, we re-estimated the previous models, including interactions between the treatment and these measures of group attitudes.

The results from these models are mixed. Neither of the interactions between the treatment and ethnocentrism is significant, although they are in the expected direction.10 Additionally, we note that for perceptions of Assad, the ethnocentrism measure approaches conventional levels of significance, and in the action models the treatment variable approaches significance. Given the interactive nature of these models, we must be careful in the interpretation of these effects. These

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9 Results are similar when we replace the stereotype-derived measure of ethnocentrism with one calculated using feeling thermometers. These results are not shown.

10 Using a one-tailed test, both interactions approach, but do not reach conventional levels of significance (p=0.10 in the trait model, and p=0.15 in the action model).
findings would suggest that when evaluating Assad, even subjects in the control group leverage their ethnocentric beliefs when evaluating him (perhaps a function of the newspaper article all subjects were exposed to which included an image of Assad). Yet more interestingly, when we consider the findings from the model of support for action against Assad, the treatment dummy suggests that even for subjects who are not explicitly ethnocentric, the treatment (specifically the manipulated image of Assad) led them to be more willing to take action against Syria.

Having illustrated that even a subtle manipulation evokes hostility toward a foreign other, and that subjects’ predispositions have their own effects on such judgments, we as a next step delve deeper into the source of these results. Following the work of Kinder and Kam, we considered whether the observed effects for ethnocentrism are driven by pride in one’s in-group, or their hostility toward other out-groups. To do so, we generate separate measures for in-group pride and out-group hostility using the stereotype items used to capture ethnocentrism. We then re-estimate the models from Table 2. These results are presented in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perceptions of Assad</th>
<th>Action Against Assad</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.32*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-group Pride</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td>0.46*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
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<td>Out-group Hostility</td>
<td>0.66**</td>
<td>0.60*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-group x Treatment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-group x Treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Cell values are OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. DV: 1 (positive perceptions of Assad/oppose removing Assad) to 7 (negative perceptions of Assad/support removing Assad). + p<0.10; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01.

11 In-group pride is represented by the semantic differential stereotype items for subjects’ in-group, coded from -1 (negative in-group stereotypes) to 1 (positive in-group stereotypes). Out-group hostility is measured using the stereotype items for each of the out-groups noted, recoded to run from -1 (positive out-group stereotypes) to 1 (negative out-group stereotypes).
The simple results examining the independent effects of the stereotype prime, in-group pride, and out-group hostility mirror our previous results considering the effects of ethnocentrism. Here we see that both components of ethnocentric thinking have a positive and significant impact on subjects’ expressed opinions. Both greater pride in one’s in-group and an increased tendency to denigrate out-groups leads subjects to view Assad more negatively, and to be more supportive of intervening in Syria. **Importantly, after controlling for both components of ethnocentrism, the treatment still has the expected effect.**

Given our expectation that ethnocentric thinking would condition subjects’ responses to the stereotype prime, we also examined interactions between the treatment indicator and both in-group pride and out-group hostility separately. The results would suggest that decomposing the variation in ethnocentrism into in-group and out-group-oriented thinking is less efficacious for considering how such thinking might condition responses to treatments. While the component terms are all in the expected direction, none of the interactions even approaches conventional levels of significance with a one-tailed test.

Taken together, these patterns of results suggest that subtle variations in appearance of political figures evoke stereotypical thinking on the part of citizens, having a significant effect on their opinions on world events and US foreign policy. More interestingly, they operate in a domain where one might expect very little movement – the possibility of committing US forces to another overseas conflict, a domain where ceiling effects are expected.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The popular resistance to intervention in Syria is likely due to large drivers of foreign policy opinion, such as war-weariness from our intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, concerns about cost (especially during difficult economic times), and not seeing a clear US interest at stake in the Syrian conflict. Yet, the significant difference in the public’s (low) level of support compared to support for intervening in Libya, especially given the known facts about the Assad regime and their possession of, and use of, chemical weapons, presented a puzzle. Part of solving that puzzle may relate to the commonly cited tendency of the public to see America as a force for good that only intervenes against serious threats and evil adversaries. Assad does not have the prior reputation as a villain that Hussein and Gaddafi from earlier conflicts, and he had not been demonized.

More to the point, we thus hypothesized that Assad’s distinctly Western look may play a role in limiting the mobilization of public support for intervention. Because Assad’s image diverges
from recent previous U.S. foreign policy villains, this could lead US onlookers to perceive him as less of a threat and be less an appropriate target for military action, even though his actions are easily in line with, or worse than, past notorious military dictators in the region. By showing that respondents who are primed with a picture of Assad with darker skin are less significantly less supportive of aggressive intervention and perceive him as less of a threat, our experiment lends positive evidence to this hypothesis. It is difficult to define him as the “other” when he looks like “us”.

The fact that the prime had the expected effect is in line with what the research literature on racial priming and colorism (e.g., Viglione et al, 2011, Banks 2008, Hochschild 2006, Maddox and Gray 2002, Hunter 1998) intuitively suggested; and our findings further support earlier work on the impact of priming on shaping public opinion on issues (Druckman 2004, Bargh 1999, Krosnick and Kinder 1990, Iyengar and Kinder 1987). The finding of significant differences is even more interesting given the subtlety of the prime. Respondents all read the same news story describing the dangerous and harmful actions of Assad and the condemnation by the west. The only change was the altering of his skin tone in his official photo, and this treatment was enough to prime individuals and alter opinion. Substantively, the results are modest shifts in opinion, though statistically significant. This result too is supported by previous research on the power of images to prime stereotypes in the absence of verbal cues (Valentino et al. 2002, Mendelberg 2001), what is known about the impact of political policy preferences, and attitudes about trust and potential partners being affected by racial/ethnic preconceptions and nationality (Mendelberg 2008a, 2008b; Glaser, Laibson, Sheinkman, and Soutter 2000). Regardless of whether his non stereotypical unaltered appearance reduced support for action, or whether darkening his appearance increased support for action, the troubling fact is that his appearance seemed to impact public opinion.

Normatively, it is likely a good thing that simply altering the color skin does not shift people across our scale from sanctions all the way to intervention. The prime’s effect is a shift in opinion but not a wild swing from opposition to support. Further, making people aware of their vulnerability to such primes and the biases of colorism may have the effect of making them less vulnerable. We know that merely learning about such susceptibility can mitigate the effect, making further research and dissemination of the findings arguably important.

The results of our extended hypotheses are less straightforward in effects. While ethnocentrism consistently increases support for more aggressive policies toward Syria, it does not have a clear moderating influence on the treatment in our interaction models. This may be, in part,
due to the unique nature of Assad’s image because ethnocentric or Muslim stereotypes might not trigger for him given his Western look. Even with his skin darkened Assad still sports a modern haircut and a business suit. Neither would necessarily trigger anti-Muslim or Middle Easterner attitudes. We need to investigate this linkage more thoroughly in the future.

Accordingly, there are more experimental manipulations that can be done to tease out the importance of Assad’s image. If the Western P.R. firm’s strategy is working, possibly altering his clothes to a military uniform from his business suit may prime people to alter opinions. Further, this experiment has not broached the power of the image of Assad’s wife Asma, and our future investigations may attempt to examine how his Western looking, physically attractive wife may soften his image.

While it is common to discuss generalizability (cautiously), in this case the question has very important potential ramifications. For example, could Putin’s skin color and dress have an impact on public opinion about US foreign policy relative to Ukraine (and could an experiment such as ours be replicated with the Russian leader by altering his appearance if not his skin tone)? Though there is potential for parallel priming effects, the results found in this analysis may be more influential on opinion of Assad than better known foreign adversaries like Putin, given Assad’s limited exposure to the American public. And, while not wanting to overstate the significance of our findings, looking at the heartbreaking human terrain in Syria, where today an estimated 9 million Syrians (some 48% of their population) have had to become refugees either externally or internally (syrianrefugees.eu), we wonder just how much can someone get away with the right “look” and a good public relations campaign?

Overall, this analysis broadly contributes to our understanding of priming effects in foreign relations (an understudied phenomenon) as well as offering a possible factor that helps explain the specific puzzle of public attitudes toward US intervention in Syria. It seems Assad may be benefiting from his distinctly Western look and light skin when evaluated by the American public. Action in the foreign policy realm, in a democracy, often requires mobilization of public opinion, and historically one aspect of that has been the demonization of the other. While normatively troubling to accept, the simple darkening of Assad’s skin seems to shift support toward a more aggressive US policy of regime change in Syria.
References

Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia (August 8, 1990). Available at: George Bush Presidential Library
http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2147&year=&month


Appendix A.

Trait items (Agree/Disagree, 1= Strongly Agree to 7= Strongly Disagree)
1. Assad is really not that different from us.
2. Assad is someone we can work with.
3. Assad is someone we can trust.
4. Assad is someone we could be an ally with.
5. Assad is a threat to our values (reverse coded).
6. Assad is an enemy of the United States (reverse coded).

Action Items (Support or Oppose, 1= Strongly Support to 7= Strongly Oppose)
1. American use of non-military means, such as economic sanctions, to get Assad out of power?
2. Giving military aid to the Syrian opposition forces who are fighting to remove Assad from power?
3. The use of missile or drone strikes (both unmanned) to kill Assad?
4. Our use of assassination to kill Assad?
5. The use of air strikes to kill Assad?
6. The use of American combat troops to remove Assad from power?
Appendix B.
Control News Story

Crisis in Syria Highlights Questions of U.S. Role

Associated Press

Bashar al-Assad became the head of the Syrian government in 2000 when his father, who ruled Syria for three decades, died. Though it was hoped he would be more democratic than his father, his regime has routinely arrested, tortured, and killed critics.

The Arab Spring reached Syria early in 2011 with peaceful protests calling for political and civil rights reform, including ending the so-called state of emergency, which has limited their rights since put in place in the early 1960s. The protests turned into a war between the government and its opponents. In July 2012 the Red Cross officially declared it a civil war, with tens of thousands dead.

Due to the Assad regime’s harsh response, and its unwillingness to move toward democracy, the United States, Canada, and the European Union all put sanctions in place against the Syrian regime.

Last year, as evidence mounted that they had used chemical weapons several times against the opposition, there was a growing consensus that this threat was not only to the Syrian people, but to the prohibition against the use of Chemical and Biological weapons which could threaten people everywhere, including US troops and citizens. President Obama asked Congress to authorize military action against Syria calling this a threat to national security.

However, in the face of possible unilateral military action by the United States, and after a meeting between Secretary of State John Kerry and President Putin, Russia told Syria to agree to give up their chemical weapons in a deal that allowed President Assad to hold onto power, and he agreed.

The civil war rages on. With military support from Russia and Hezbollah, the government seems to have gained the advantage from the rebels who are getting some support from abroad, but it is limited and they are not united, even sometimes fighting each other. So far it has killed some 150,000 people, created approximately 4 million refugees (mostly internally displaced), and greatly increased poverty, hunger, lack of access to medical care, etc. for many more.

Treatment News Story

Crisis in Syria Highlights Questions of U.S. Role

Associated Press

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Appendix C.
Fake News Article Text

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