

Presentational flagging and political change in the Middle East

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Abstract Over the last decade, the War in Iraq and the Arab Spring have both led to a substantial shake of the region's political kaleidoscope and political balance. The paper seeks to elucidate what this means for the study of flags in the region. It explores the major shift in the way flag usage has evolved there from exclusive government sanction of flag display to a virtual free-for-all of flags used by different factions and contenders, and ever more creatively, in the political turmoil. The paper contends that this new trend is not simply explained by a decline in state control. A new presentational mode of flag usage is prompted by reflexive awareness of the increasing global visibility of the political conflicts in Syria, Tunisia and Egypt. Vexillologists will now need to look to the street rather than the state for a comprehensive understanding of flags of the region.

The last decade in the Middle East has seen great political turmoil, and violence, and with it, further change in symbols of state identity symbolic change.¹ Three frontline states - Egypt, Iraq and Syria - once competed for influence in the region. 'In the wake of the Arab Spring', Middle East analyst Aaron Miller wrote, 'all three have essentially gone off line.'²

On 17 December 2010, the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia sparked the so-called 'Arab Spring'.³ Within months, a wave of protest had swept away the autocratic rulers of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and placed heavy pressure on the governments of many other countries including Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Jordan and Algeria to also step aside.⁴ Political analyst Roger Owen noted that 'where the President's own family occupied the highest positions in the military and the security forces' they chose to stay and fight bloody civil wars.⁵ Overall, Middle East scholar L.C. Brown would characterize this as another shake of the political kaleidoscope.⁶ With turmoil has come periods of political uncertainty and dissent. And with rising dissent has come symbolic change.

For the past two and a half years the Arab Spring has captivated political analysts, orientalists and vexillologists alike. For those of us at home watching events unfold, unusual changes have occurred. It is not just that new flags have appeared (though that is both exciting and invites explanation). What is really curious is that once limited usage of national flags also has changed – part of a general bid for emancipation.

This paper will argue that there has been substantial shift in the context and way



flags are used. It will explain why the Middle East has moved from total government sanction for flag display and concomitant limitation on public usage to a new situation where flags are now displayed widely, and ever more creatively by the general public.

How to understand this change? The obvious answer is waning state power to control who gets to display what, where and how. This paper discusses the state's declining ability to maintain its 'power to name', and the struggle over the national narrative that has ensued.

However, interrelated with this process is a further, more subtle cause of the changing role of flag display. The paper posits that globalization and social media have also created a new culture among some citizens that endows the individual as a creative, playful and interactive participant. Massive waves of flag use are evident in ways hitherto unseen in these countries.

An overview of this cultural change will explain how it is not only related to, but in fact has energised the struggle over the various national narratives.

First, a clarification. 'The Flag' in this paper refers not only to the national flag displayed in its official capacity. The power of the flag lies beyond the physical piece of cloth: it represents the collective nation and so its power extends to all designs and graphics that incorporate its *likeness*.⁷ This paper focuses specifically on the image of the flag – to include therefore all contexts in which the flag image is used: political posters, on-line profiles, pictures and at rallies. The focus is on how the flag is deployed beyond its traditional purpose, for a clearer picture of what is going on inside a country.

In periods of national crisis, such as that now dominating the Middle East, an assessment is useful of how readers respond on various communications sites - the blogosphere - in reaction to the overall drama of dissent and the role of flags in that.

Formal and legislative gazettes as to the meaning of the flag tell us nothing about the fluid events of the moment. In the face of evidence in different visual media of different flags, and many of them, in the transition from exclusive government use to a virtual free-for-all, I raise two key questions:

- 1) Who is using the flag?
- 2) What particular flag is pictured and where it is used .

Flag change explained very briefly:

In Syria and Libya, at least, the national flags became too semiotically intertwined with the ruling regimes and therefore lost their ability to stand alone as 'higher order symbols' of the nation as a whole.⁸ Thus compromised, they were replaced by opposition movements with untainted earlier models.

Loss over power to name - the propaganda machine falters.

The first reason that would lead to the significant change in the ways in which flags are used during periods of political crisis has been challenge to the state's power to represent the nation.



States maintain power over their citizens by both coercion and persuasion, by force and through the winning of consent.⁹ Winning consent or 'legitimacy' goes well beyond the ability of a regime to wrap itself in culturally resonant symbols to authenticate its dominance.¹⁰

Power won and maintained through consent is also achieved through the ability of one group to have its particular ideology accepted or taken for granted as an adequate and useful world view for all members of a cultural group. Ordinary people then appropriate that world view and thus interact with one another based on these cultural understandings of reality.¹¹

This dynamic is understood as the power of representation or 'the power to name.' For example the negative stereotyping of certain ethnic groups through media can shape the way ordinary people interact with those groups in real life.¹² Historian Graeme Gill explained that this ability to name is crucially important to governments: whoever can define and articulate a sense of truth and reality will wield substantial political power.¹³

The power to name and shape national politics and national identity via the 'national narrative' is significant for our discussion. Cultural Studies Professor Chris Barker points out that the nation-state is both a political concept and a form of imaginative identification. The unity of national identities is constructed and given meaning through 'the narration of the nation' via stories, images, rituals, and symbols.¹⁴ Symbols such as the flag become the grammar of these national narratives and the totems of group identities. Flags should be understood as cultural artifacts that individuals, groups, and institutions employ in an ongoing social construction of reality. Scot Guenter explained that 'the meaning of any flag is not inherent but conferred, and that meaning is subject to flux.'¹⁵ Political power devolves upon whoever gets to shape or confer the significance of these symbols.

Power over symbolic representations is also reinforced through a monopoly over communication and the use of the physically coercive apparatus of the state.

Gill observes that

'The capacity to name is, in principle, open to all... However in practice, this capacity is not shared equally. Those who are in charge of the main structures of the society, especially those concerned with the principal instruments of communication... are better able to shape the myth and its symbols than ordinary people because they are able to project what they shape across the society as a whole, and if they can monopolise the means of communication, they can diminish the power of alternative formulations and thereby consolidate their own conceptions.'¹⁶

In the case of the authoritarian presidential security states of the Middle East, media control was commonly concentrated in the hands of the regime elites.¹⁷ The regimes also relied heavily on their intelligence and police services to ensure that any dissent was effectively silenced. Similarly, the form and content of education curricula, state celebrations, and all other state propaganda were directed to the single aim of perpetuating the regime's hold on power.¹⁸ This extended to national symbols and flag usage.

Whilst it is unclear which states of the Middle East actually restricted flag use by law,



it was obvious that limitations on the use of the flag by private citizens existed.¹⁹ Even then, this private use was severely limited in creativity to displays and design compositions that fitted within the bounds of the regime's political agenda or narrative. For example, in Syria, only the Assad trinity – Hafez, the father, Bashar, the son, and in spirit, Basil, the heir apparent killed in car crash – could be depicted in proximity to the flag: virtually deified (itself a Muslim blasphemy), in effect they owned the country, hijacking the flag with it.

Some have argued that these constraints were enforced through self-censorship, social pressure and informal state repression²⁰- a direct corollary of the power firmly in the hands of the state to define reality and shape the meaning of symbols.

In prolonged political crises, the ruling hegemony and its ideology is no longer taken for granted and often invites challenge. In the case of the Arab Spring, as the propaganda apparatus that authoritarian presidential security states used to maintain their 'power to name' lost their total dominance, room was created for counter-narratives to enter public discussion. Physical displays of dissent without fear of retribution, such as publicly burning the national flag on the streets of Homs in Syria or Benghazi in Libya, emboldened others to speak out against the regime. Owen explained that once the 'wall of fear' on which the Arab dictatorships depended had been breached 'there could be no going back.'²¹ Street protests led to the rise of alternative voices, and with them alternative visions of who the citizens are and how the country should be run.



Khaled Said Martyrdom poster.²³

During the Arab Spring the significance of the national flag as a tool of various regimes' power was firmly contested. By wrapping their protest in the flag and the language of patriotism, ordinary citizens sought to reclaim the national narrative. Consider the way protesters used the flag as a central part of their protest ritual. As Rosiny explained, 'with the occupation of the squares, each population took possession of the geographical center - the heart of the nation, as it were - and 'cleaned' it of the 'corrupt' regime. Due to their mobility, the simplest but most arousing of theatre scenery national flags were a major part in this symbolic re-christening.'²² This is a cardinal point: flags are important symbols in public and civic discourse not just because of their mytho-poetic national symbolism but because they reinforce this and release powerful emotions by the fact that they are mobiles and portable. This was also seen in the way the national flag was linked with other imagery such as the martyrdom photos of Khaled Said, to create other and equally powerful new meanings.

Flags have always had a wonderful versatility and convenience as a means to convey the maximum meaning from the insubstantial world whilst using the minimum material of the physically substantial world. If flags have the versatility and convenience of mobiles, other mobiles now have reinforced their power.

New communication technologies, specifically social media, have played a key role in this process. Political scientist Hans Schattle explained that

'the new global social media platforms certainly have opened doors for citizens across the Arab world to organize themselves, project their voices, and spur a transnational political awakening in pursuit of basic rights and democratic citizenship.'

The capacity to communicate via social media circumvented the gatekeeping and controlling mechanisms of traditional state-controlled media. Furthermore, this tech-

nology now 'affords and privileges the interaction and exchange between and among users.'²⁵ As Professor of Communications Studies David Marshall noted, conversation is at the 'epicentre of postings and is the fibre that holds social networks together over time.'²⁶ This creates alternative public spaces where voices are heard and alternative visions of and for the country shared.

Whilst social media platforms have led what has been described as 'a widening of the public sphere'²⁷ Marshall also highlighted that 'a democratization of the resources to record and exhibit has grown exponentially through the convergent uses of mobile media to capture moments and online media to display those same moments.'²⁸ One observer recounts how 'protesters carrying a rock in one hand, a cell-phone in the other began marching on the streets of Sidi Bouzid just hours after Bouazizi set himself on fire.'²⁹ This further empowered the individual to bypass the methods of state oppression and enter the public debate.

The specific focus on the individual and their interaction with new portable technology is also important. It is common in history to find political protests articulated or led through the medium of pre-existing opposition political groups. People often relied on them to be heard. One such example is the central role of political parties in the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979.³⁰ However, the democratization of new technologies such as social media and affordable mobile recording systems has liberated the individual from much of this reliance³¹. Despite the existence of traditional opposition groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, during the Arab Spring in places like Tahrir Square, it was ordinary people (and newly formed groups of) whose voices were projected – and around the world almost instantaneously.

During the political upheaval the power to shape political reality thus moved from the dominance of the state (and other intermediary groups) over to ordinary people. These processes together opened up new avenues for individual creativity and expression of national identity, including new ways of displaying the national flag.

Globalization and social media, a new culture of participation:

The second identifiable reason for significant change in the ways in which flags have been and are deployed during this period of political crisis is indeed the rise of globalization and social media. Both phenomena have created a new culture among many citizens that allows the individual to be a creative, playful and interactive participant.

As noted earlier, in addition to creating new public spheres the rise of social media has created an online culture of the presentational self. The individual citizen is an active participant in this 'presentational' rather than representational form of media.³² Individuals speak for themselves. It is understood as 'presentational' in nature because individuals now inhabit spaces where they are not only on display but they think about their mediated construction of themselves – sometimes continuously, if not narcissistically.³³ Marshall explained that these online 'personas' are 'a kind of ritual of the performance of the self that is highly conscious of a potential audience as much as it is a careful preening and production.'³⁴ A key characteristic of this culture is that practices are 'reflexively' produced – that is, participating individuals are self-aware of their creative participatory potential.

Not only has the transition to a culture of on-line communication resulted in a na-



tional narrative open to contest by ordinary people; more than that, these ordinary people are also fully aware of both their own visibility and their ability to create meaning within it.

The culture of the presentational self has subsequently given rise to and inspired whole ranks of on-line citizens who can, and do, construct, play and interact with their own identity via their on-line personae. This includes such facets of their identity as the national (with its associated symbols, like the national flag). For example, upon the resignation of Tunisian President 'a well-known Egyptian blogger, Bint Masreya, posted a picture of the Tunisian flag and commented (in Arabic): 'Tunisia: we are proud of your people; may the same happen to us.'³⁵ Many Facebook users within Tunisia and beyond also changed their profile images to that of the red Tunisian flag.³⁶

Far from being isolated on-line, traditional forms of media have learned to link up with these forms of social media in a 'seamless flow.'³⁷ Schattle explained how, during the Arab Spring, traditional media depended on on-line content for their representations of news events. In the very beginning of the Arab Spring, 'Al Jazeera showed a video clip of the protest that its producers found on Facebook.'³⁸ Increasingly, on-line content provided producers of traditional media with the bulk of their raw content. Schattle recorded how 'journalists and commentators around the world came to rely on Twitter feeds of citizens tweeting instant updates and holding online conversations directly from the center of the action.'³⁹ This process was perpetuated by traditional media as well: Al Jazeera hired freelance journalist activists who used Facebook to send in amateur videos shot on mobile phones.⁴⁰ Through such interaction, the debates (and specifically for us, flag usage) on-line became an active, material and, some argue, central part of unfolding events in the 'real world.'⁴¹

These self-aware and empowered voices have been further amplified and motivated by the global notoriety and visibility of their cause. This linkage between social media websites and global news organizations proved crucial in boosting momentum and garnering worldwide attention for the protest movement. This awareness of global visibility is evident in the number of English language placards in the protests and online. Rosiny confirms that the 'demonstrators' English and Arabic placards - filmed with cell phones and posted on the Internet, then shown as footage on Arab satellite TV channels, which was then broadcast by Western TV stations - were directed at a national, regional and global public.'⁴² This global notoriety in turn further motivated individuals to play with symbols and to push the boundaries of how they were presented. Ultimately this process created individuals with an awareness of the local and global visibility of their opinions. The dynamic became inexorable and in conjunction with cultural motivation encouraged active participation in the creative struggle over the meaning, role and usage of the flags.

Conclusion / Summary

Most evident is the change in how flags are now used. Identifying these changes is highly significant as they reflect to the observer the changing politics on the ground as events unfold, with the key questions for political observers and vexillologist alike: what flags are displayed, where and by whom ?



The causes of these changes during the Arab Spring are two-fold. Firstly, evident decline in state control over symbols. Secondly, a presentational mode of flag usage is fuelled by reflexive awareness by the protagonists of the increasing global visibility of these political conflicts. Put another way, the unfolding drama of the flags unfurled is a heightened scramble for mastery over the national – and regional - narrative, and in that ugly and bitter struggle the impact of social media has increased the motivation and capability of the individual to participate politically. That in turn has led to the increasingly creative ways of displaying the national flag – and obliges vexillologists to see flags as more than items in a reference work or catalogue.



Appendix

EGYPT
From this... to this...



Mosaic of Hosni Mubarak.⁴³



Dictators' Day of Judgment⁴⁴

To this... to this!



Facebook profile picture:
Immortalizing The Martyrs of Tahrir Square.⁴⁵



Naked dissent Aliaa Magda Elmahdy - Egyptian blogger famous for her nudist activism.⁴⁶



TUNISIA:
From this...



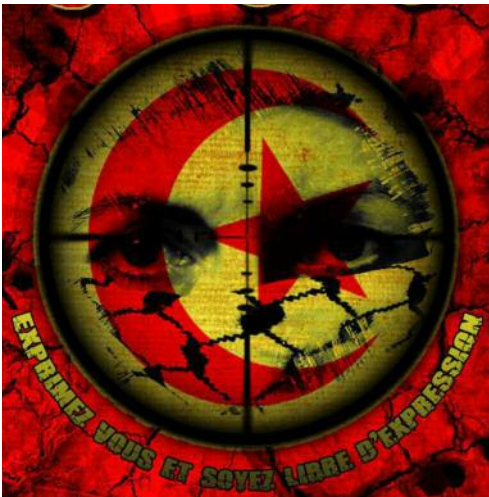
to this...



Protestors burn Ben Ali.⁴⁸

< Christmas eve with president Ben Ali.⁴⁷

To this...



Tunisia free profile picture, express yourself and feel free expression (exprimez vous et soyez libre 'expression).⁴⁹

to this...



Tunisia Free Facebook photo, 'Tunisia roam around the capital'.⁵⁰

to this...



An opposition Facebook page with a blood-spattered Tunisian flag.⁵¹

SYRIA:
From this...



Aleppo Souk

to this...



Syrian protesters chant anti-Assad slogans, and wave revolutionary flags, during a celebration to commemorate the second anniversary of the Syrian revolution.⁵²

to this...



People burn portraits of Bashar al-Assad in Idlib, northern Syria.⁵³

to this...



The New Syria: Facebook page.⁵⁴

Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this paper the Middle East is defined as Israel, Iran and Turkey and the nations of the Arab league minus the Horn of Africa countries of Somalia, Djibouti and Comoros.
- 2 Aaron David Miller, 'Tribes With Flags', *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2013 <http://www.foreign-policy.com/articles/2013/02/27/tribes_with_flags_arab_spring_states> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 3 The term, Arab Spring, informs Rosiny, 'connotes a thawing that has caused the authoritarian structures to melt away, as it were, instead of being replaced through coups, political assassinations or externally driven "regime changes"'. Stephan Rosiny, 'The Arab Spring: Triggers, Dynamics and Prospects', *Hamburg: GIGA Focus*, 2012. p. 5
- 4 Rania Abouzeid, 'Bouazizi: The Man Who Set Himself and Tunisia on Fire', *Time LIFE Magazine*, 21 January 2011 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2044723,00.html>> [accessed 24 February 2013].
- 5 Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). p. 180
- 6 L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 7 Reichl noted that, 'symbols that are loaded with a history and an ideology... can only partly be contextualised into a non-political context. As long as there are critical viewers who stick to their ideological associations... these symbols can never be seen as just apolitical 'fashion' items. Susanne Reichl, 'Flying the Flag: The Intricate Semiotics of National Identity', *European Journal of English Studies*, 8 (2008), 205–217. p. 212
- 8 Zev Landes, 'Flags of Syria', *Crux Australis*, Volume 25/4 No. 104 (2012).
- 9 Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2008), p. 463.
- 10 Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination; Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 9.
- 11 For a short discussion on Gramsci's notion of Hegemonic domination see: Barker. Chapter 14
- 12 See: Stuart Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in *Representation; Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. by Stuart Hall (Los Angeles: SAGE, 1997); John Corner, *Theorising Media: Power, Form and Subjectivity* (Manchester, U.K.; New York: New York: Manchester University Press; Distributed in the United States exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 13 Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). P. 16
- 14 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation', in *Nation and narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990). p. 260
- 15 Quoted in Peter J. Orenski, *Quo Vadimus: An Essay on the State and Future of Vexillology* (United States of America: New Milton, 2003). P. 38
- 16 Gill, p. 17.
- 17 Ferran Izquierdo Brichs, *Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power* (Routledge, 2012). P. 22
- 18 Ibid. p. 53
- 19 The reason for this lack of specific information was not the potential availability of data but the research resources of this particular project.
- 20 See: Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Wedeen.
- 21 Ibid. pp. 178 -179
- 22 Rosiny. p. 6
- 23 Brian Whitaker, 'AlBab: An Open Door to the Arab World' <http://www.albab.com/blog/blog1006b.htm#mubarak_regime_under_pressure_over_killing> [accessed 1 June 2013].



- 24 H. Schattle, *Globalization and Citizenship*, Globalization (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012). p. 56
- 25 P. David Marshall, 'The Specular Economy', *Society*, 47 (2010), 498–502 <doi:10.1007/s12115-010-9368-5>. P. 498
- 26 P. David Marshall, 'The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media', *Celebrity Studies*, 1 (2010), 35–48 <doi:10.1080/19392390903519057>. p. 42
- 27 Marshall, 'The Promotion and Presentation of the Self' p. 40
- 28 Marshall, 'The Specular Economy' p. 500
- 29 Schattle. p. 35
- 30 See: William Cleveland, 'A History of the Modern Middle East', 2000.
- 31 The role of organized groups of people was still significant but, as was noted, not essential for the individual to enter into the debate. For example 'In Syria local coordination committees develop names and slogans for demonstrations that suit the situation; these are an important element of the staging and dramaturgy of the protest movements.' Rosiny. p. 5
- 32 Marshall noted that traditional representational forms of media such as television and film have not been totally outmoded by online. Rather they are seen as 'less relentlessly omnipresent and perhaps more remediated through on-line pathways.' 'It is more accurate,' Marshall concluded, 'to say that that television and film as examples of representational media is just less profound as a structure for our culture.' The space of creation and dissemination is therefore shared between social media and traditional media. See: Marshall, 'The Promotion and Presentation of the Self'. p. 38
- 33 Marshall, 'The Specular Economy' p. 498-499
- 34 Marshall, 'The Promotion and Presentation of the Self' p. 40`
- 35 Schattle. p. 40
- 36 Schattle. p. 40
- 37 Marshall, 'The Specular Economy' p. 501
- 38 Schattle. p. 35
- 39 Schattle. p. 35
- 40 Schattle. p.53
- 41 Schattle. pp. 52 - 53
- 42 Rosiny. Pp. 4 -5
- 43 'Mosaic Of President Hosni Mubarak Cairo... High-Res Stock Photography | Getty Images AU |76194881' <<http://www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/photo/mosaic-of-president-hosni-mubarak-cairohigh-res-stock-photography/76194881>> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 44 'Islamic Societies Review: January 2011' <http://www.reasonedcomments.org/2011_01_01_archive.html#.Uals7-vzly5> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 45 'Immortalizing The Martyrs of Tahrir Square', Facebook <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Immortalizing-The-Martyrs-of-Tahrir-Square/162575473795004>> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 46 'Egypt Blogger Strips Naked in Protest Against Constitution', ynet<<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4322922,00.html>> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 47 'CHRISTMAS EVE WITH PRESIDENT BEN ALI (Part One) | Wandering Camera' <<http://wandering-camera.com/12/>> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 48 'Exiled Tunisian Leader Denies Role in Protester Deaths: Lawyer', Reuters (Tunis, 24 May 2012) <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/24/us-tunisia-benali-idUSBRE84N1AE20120524>> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 49 'Tunisie Libre . Free Tunisia 's Photos' <<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=482156781844891&set=pb.142505865809986.-2207520000.1370054171.&type=3&theater>> [accessed 1 June 2013].



- 50 'Tunisie Libre . Free Tunisia 's Photos '
- 51 'Slide Show: Tunisia in Revolt | The Nation'
<<http://www.thenation.com/slideshow/157953/slideshow-tunisia-revolt#ixzz2UvhW6yWt>>
[accessed 1 June 2013].
- 52 'Mideast Syria | Buy Photos | AP Images | DetailView'
<<http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Mideast-Jordan-Syria/dabdbb27b905429382bba73d41e92d7e/50/0>> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 53 'People Burn Portraits of Bashar al-Assad in Idlib, Northern Syria | Egypt Independent'
<<http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/684011>> [accessed 1 June 2013].
- 54 'The New Syria' <<http://www.facebook.com/TheNewSyria>> [accessed 1 June 2013].

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Biography

Zev Landes was born in Melbourne, Australia. He studied History at Deakin University and in 2011 completed his honours dissertation looking at flag change in the Middle East. Zev is now a casual teaching staff member in the Middle Eastern Studies Department at Deakin University. In 2012 Zev was introduced to the *Flags Australia* Triumvirate (Ralph, Ralph and Tony) and has since joined the organization. Zev has published two major articles in *Crux Australis*, both featuring his own flag photography. Zev also runs a small business selling discount fashion. This will be Zev's first vexillological conference and I have heard that he is very excited!

Zev Landes

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