

Media Discourses of Moderation: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Global Coverage of Ahmed Al-Sharaa's Presidency

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Abstract—This article examines how global media portrayed the Syrian President Al-Sharaa before and after he assumed the presidency. It employs critical discourse analysis to investigate how media coverage influences the public perceptions of him and the nature of political transition during these two periods. The study uses Fairclough's model; the Van Leeuwen framework; and evaluative theory to analyze the linguistic techniques used in the global media. Through analysis of fifty English-language articles published in leading international newspapers between 2020 and 2025, this study identifies four key conclusions: First, the news media portrays a significant shift of Al-Sharaa's intellectual and political trajectory. Second, it employs laudatory language that presents him as 'open', 'pragmatic', and 'prone to change', which fosters a more appealing image for the audience. Third, it depicts Al-Sharaa's language as actively shaping events rather than passively responding to events. Finally, it links Al-Sharaa's discourse to concepts of national cohesion and community service embodying a political transformation with collective implications, even though this transcendence is influenced more by personal factors. The results reveal that the media not only serves as a reporting entity but actively participates in reshaping the political landscape by the manner in which it portrays and reproduces leaders' images. The study analyzes only English-language content. Future investigations should include multiple languages, examine public reactions, and compare Al-Sharaa's image with other leaders undergoing similar shifts. In conclusion, the research verifies that media discourse acts as a symbolic force shaping leader portrayals and public opinion.

Index Terms—global media, public perceptions, linguistic techniques, political transformation

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, the media has become the primary gateway through which public perceptions of political leaders are reshaped. Published materials, whether in the form of reports, analyses, or digital content, do not merely convey news; they actively participate in constructing political meaning and directing public interpretation of events. Fairclough (1995) highlights this idea, noting that media discourse selects certain meanings to emphasize while neglecting others, leading to a restructuring of how audiences understand political reality. Van Dijk (2008) argues that media messages possess the power to reconstruct collective perceptions and reshape political affiliations and identities. Therefore, studying the mechanisms by which leaders' images are shaped within media discourse is crucial, especially during periods of political upheaval or widespread debate.

Within this framework, Ahmed Al-Sharaa's recent presence in international media has emerged as an example of a leader being reinterpreted in a different light. Many news outlets have portrayed him as a figure who has abandoned a harsh rhetoric and adopted more balanced and open positions. This discourse of "transition" has become a constant element in the media narrative surrounding him. This pattern of approach opens the door to several questions: What linguistic and narrative mechanisms do the media employ to construct a story of political transition from a hardline tone

to a more moderate approach? And what impact does this narrative have on shaping how others perceive him? Such characterization may alter the way international actors engage with the leader and reshape the interpretation of his policies and decisions. Analyzing this discourse also allows for a deeper understanding of how concepts like moderation, reform, and extremism are circulated in the global media, and how these terms are transformed into tools for shaping the political narrative in the current era.

Although Al-Sharaa's political transformation has received extensive international media coverage, academic output examining how such transformations are presented or analyzed from a linguistic perspective remains extremely limited. The vast majority of studies in political discourse focus on leaders from the Western context, while the representation of leaders in the Arab world and the Middle East receives far less research attention. Consequently, our understanding of how the global media frames the concept of "moderation" when discussing Al-Sharaa remains incomplete.

A review of the literature also reveals a clear absence of studies employing critical discourse analysis to deconstruct how global media portray Al-Sharaa and his transition from moving from a hardline stance to a more moderate approach. This deficiency is further highlighted by the scarcity of research comparing the framing techniques used across various international media platforms. In light of this research gap, this study aims to fill the gap by analyzing the discursive representations and framing mechanisms employed in global media coverage of Al-Sharaa. Hence, the study begins to answer the following questions:

- i. How do international media outlets use their linguistic resources to portray Al-Sharaa's shift from hardline rhetoric to a more moderate stance?
- ii. What rhetorical strategies do global media outlets employ to present Al-Sharaa's presidency as a form of political transformation?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Media Discourse and the Construction of Political Meaning*

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping how people perceive political figures and public issues. Several researchers argue that the media's function extends beyond simply reporting facts; it encompasses the construction and reconstruction of meaning. According to Fairclough (1995), media outlets selectively highlight certain events while neglecting others, thereby reshaping public perception of the political landscape. Van Dijk (2008) demonstrates that the media relies on intellectual and ideological frameworks that influence how the audience interprets political actions. Hall (1997) adds that media representation is not neutral and that editorial choices are a key factor in shaping public opinion.

By using specific headlines, highlighting recurring themes, employing particular images, and relying on words with specific connotations, the media can shape a mental image of leaders, portraying them as moderates, potential threats, reformers, or authoritarian rulers (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This influence is amplified during periods of significant political change or crises.

B. *Extremism, Moderation, and the Construction of Political Impressions*

The literature suggests that concepts like "extremism" and "moderation" are not neutral labels, but rather are produced through discourse and reinforced by repeated use in media and politics. Schmid (2013) argues that these terms are socially constructed through media platforms that recycle and define their meanings. Busher (2019) further explains that political actors employ these classifications to serve their interests, either by presenting themselves positively or by stigmatizing and delegitimizing other parties. Tajfel's (1981) social classification theory explains how these linguistic categories contribute to the formation of collective identities that shape public opinion.

When a leader is labeled "moderate," the public tends to interpret their actions more favorably and acceptably, even if their political practices do not change significantly (Lakoff, 2002; Chong & Druckman, 2007). This pattern is particularly evident in the Middle East, where some international media outlets resort to simplistic narratives to describe complex political transformations (Lynch, 2016; Pintak, 2014). This approach to portraying leaders can have a tangible impact on the course of diplomacy, global public opinion, and the political legitimacy of leaders (Said, 1997; Hammond, 2017).

C. *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Political Leadership*

Critical discourse analysis is one of the most important tools used to understand how the image of political leaders is constructed within the media. This approach focuses on uncovering the hidden relationships between language, power, and ideology, and the meanings implicitly conveyed through media texts (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak, 2011). Wodak and Meyer (2016) indicate that this type of analysis enables researchers to trace the deep structures that shape media discourse, including framing techniques that determine how the leader is presented to the public (Entman, 1993), lexical choices used to convey connotations of danger, trust, influence, or reform (Richter, 2021a, 2021b), and narrative structures employed to construct narratives of change, renewal, or conflict (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Critical discourse analysis also reveals the implicit dichotomies upon which the media relies, such as moderation versus extremism or stability versus chaos (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Thanks to this combination of analytical tools, critical discourse analysis becomes a suitable framework for understanding how global media is reshaping the image of Al-Sharaa as a leader moving from a hardline rhetoric to a more moderate stance.

D. Global Media Representation of Middle Eastern Leaders

A wide range of research indicates that international media often adopt repetitive narrative patterns when reporting on political leaders in the Middle East. Said (1997) argues that Western media sometimes relies on preconceived cultural images that result in a simplistic or biased reading of political reality. Hammond (2012) adds that global media tends to categorize regional leaders into pre-defined stereotypes such as “reformers,” “hardliners,” or “authoritarian rulers.” Recent studies also reveal that international coverage relies on recurring, stereotypical themes—such as security, stability, conflict, or reform—as interpretive keys to understanding events in the Middle East (Pintak, 2014; Lynch, 2016). These media practices highlight the need to analyze how the media constructs the concept of “moderation” when discussing political figures like Al-Sharaa.

E. Recent Studies on Political Transformation in Media Discourse (Elaborated)

Although studies focusing directly on Al-Sharaa are scarce, recent literature illuminates how the media constructs narratives of political transformation for leaders who reshape their identities or shift their ideological positions. These studies suggest that the media tends to produce transformation stories or redemption narratives for leaders with controversial backgrounds, highlighting their symbolic actions—such as speeches, apologies, or reforms—as indicators of change. Van Leeuwen (2008) noted that such narratives often follow a specific pattern, beginning with a troubled past followed by a transformative moment leading to a new identity, while Bamberg (2011a, 2011b) asserted that these narratives represent a predictable framework for interpreting political change. Studies examining leaders in Latin America, North Africa, and Southeast Asia demonstrate that media coverage focuses on leaders' personal growth, maturity, and moderation of extremist ideologies to present them in a more palatable light to the public, as Kraidy (2017) and Terman (2020a, 2020b) noted. They also pointed out that the concept of “transformation” in the media is often a linguistic and rhetorical construct rather than a purely political one.

On the other hand, some studies have focused on how the media frames leaders as moderates or reformers. Entman (1993) and Rees (2001) showed that media framing determines what the public perceives as the “core issue,” while a study by Hyland (2019) indicated that the media often associates moderation with diplomatic maneuvering, neutral and soft language, or changes in style and tone rather than fundamental policy shifts, while selectively covering positive reforms. Research by Al-Rawi (2020) and Richter (2021a, 2021b) also revealed that the term “moderate” is frequently used in coverage of Gulf, Turkish, and North African leaders to suggest political stability or a move away from extremism, even when evidence for this is limited.

Furthermore, other studies have focused on how international media presents political transitions in the Middle East. Lynch (2016) noted that Western media tends to oversimplify political transformations and portray them as dramatic and sudden. Hammond (2017) demonstrated that this coverage often overlooks social and political complexities. Al-Rawi (2020) explained that global media uses emotionally charged and symbolic language to present these transitions as evidence of a “new political era,” even when political structures largely remain intact, as observed in the research of Khamis and Von (2011) and Iskandar (2019a, 2019b) on the Arab Spring and ideological shifts in the Gulf and North Africa. Taken together, these studies point to the vital role of critical discourse analysis in revealing the ideological dimensions of these media images and understanding how rhetorical tools are used in constructing the appearance of political transformation.

A recent study carried out by Salameh and Abuhasirah (2025) discussed Al-Sharaa’s speech during appearances on BC and Arabiya. They found that Al-Sharaa’s speech varies significantly depending on whether he is speaking to a domestic or international audience. While his domestic speech focuses on revolutionary legitimacy, national unity, and reconciliation after years of conflict in Syria, his international discourse adjusted to democratic principles, international law, and human rights. The language features he uses attempt to appeal to different situations and settings, Salameh and Abuhasirah concluded? Another critical analysis study of Al-Sharaa’s speech was done by Haddad (2024). This study interprets Al-Sharaa’s political speech as a strategic approach to secure Western legitimacy. Al-Sharaa’s language was portrayed as a stylistic approach to reshape his image before the foreign policy stage. Haddad’s study also clarified how discourse might be used for different audiences (East vs. West). In addition, Harmoon Center (2025) carried out a study examining Al-Sharaa’s use of different political concepts in discourse such as ‘state of law’ and his avoidance of liberal universal terms such as ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom of expression’. Harmoon Center’s study highlights Al-Sharaa’s public use of language that appears to attempt to balance law-based governance with sensitivities about secular labels. That study notes that his language intends to navigate political legitimacy amid ongoing transition periods.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology, building upon the work of Fairclough (1995, 2010) and Wodak and Meyer (2016), which views discourse as a social practice through which ideological meanings are produced and reformulated. By examining language use in media texts, the study aims to reveal how Al-Sharaa's political discourse shapes his rhetorical shift from “extremism” to “moderation” within global media. To ensure comprehensive and balanced representation, data was collected from a variety of international media sources, including Western news agencies such as *Reuters*, *the BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*, Middle Eastern and Arab media outlets such as *Al Jazeera English* and *Arabic*, regional agencies, and widely circulated international news agencies

such as *Agence France-Presse* and *Anadolu Agency*. These outlets were selected for their influence, global reach, and representation of diverse geopolitical perspectives.

In addition to media coverage, the study included Al-Sharaa's most important speeches, which are considered key texts for analysis and are publicly available through reputable news websites and international organizations' platforms. The sample covers texts published between January 2025, shortly after he assumed office, and September 2025, including his key political statements and international appearances, thus providing a clear picture of his early presidency.

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, selecting articles and texts that explicitly address Al-Sharaa's political role and legitimacy, his discourse on reform, transition, and moderation, and the reactions of international actors to his policies, as well as important public speeches such as his inaugural address, his address to the United Nations, and his speech on reconstruction. The dataset comprises fifty (50) documents, including news articles, opinion pieces, and various written texts, distributed across different regions and topics, providing a solid foundation for studying and critically analyzing political image-building strategies.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTS IN CORPUS

Region / Media Type	Number of Documents	Percentage of Total (%)
Western Media	20	40%
Middle Eastern / Arab Media	17	35%
Global Wire Agencies / International	13	25%
Total	50	100%

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of media content across different regions and media types. Western media constitutes 40% of the sample, encompassing leading global media outlets based in Europe and North America, reflecting their significant role in shaping global media discourse. In contrast, Middle Eastern and Arab media comprise 35% of the sample, reflecting regional coverage and presenting perspectives rooted in local political, cultural, and historical contexts. International news agencies account for 25% of the content, including news services such as *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) and *Anadolu Agency*, whose reports are republished or adopted by other media outlets worldwide, thus giving them considerable influence in tracking media discourse on a broad scale.

The analysis relied on Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 1995, 2010), which divides discourse analysis into three interconnected levels. The first level is the textual level, where the analysis focuses on vocabulary, metaphors, and rhetorical devices, paying particular attention to how terms such as "moderation," "reform," and "extremism," and related terms, are formulated within the media lexicon. It also identifies narrative patterns, recurring phrases, and symbolic language that reinforce specific meanings. At the second level, the discursive practice level, the analysis examines how selected media outlets produce, reproduce, or transform Al-Sharaa's discourse and political identity. This includes an examination of intertextuality between different texts and how his discourse is cited or paraphrased, as well as an analysis of discourse flow, quoting from whom, and which parts of the discourse are highlighted or omitted. Finally, the third level, social practice, involves linking discursive patterns to broader ideological, political, and social contexts, and exploring how global media structures reflect geopolitical interests, power relations, or normative frameworks such as democracy and international legitimacy, while assessing the implications for international legitimacy, domestic governance, and how the "moderate leader" narrative supports specific political agendas.

The analysis was conducted using systematic coding via qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti. The coding process began with an open coding phase, during which texts were categorized based on emerging themes such as "unity," "reconstruction," "transition," "sanctions," and "extremism." The analysis then moved to axial coding, where categories were grouped into key discursive functions, including "narrative of moderation," "political legitimacy," "institution-building discourse," and "foreign policy orientations." In the selective coding phase, the focus was narrowed to the central discourse: how Al-Sharaa's moderation is constructed and how his discourses reinforce this construction. To ensure coding reliability and minimize bias, two independent coders performed double coding on a random subsample representing 20% of the texts. The use of multiple media sources and diverse discursive texts facilitated triangulation and cross-validation of discursive strategies, while the multi-coder approach further enhanced the reliability of the results. The researcher also maintained a reflective record to document assumptions, coding decisions, and any potential biases throughout the analysis. All analyzed materials consisted of publicly available media texts and speeches, so no special ethical approval was required. Attribution was strictly maintained when quoting, and reliance was placed on sources that publish the texts in full or in part, such as news agencies, the United Nations, and government statements.

TABLE 2
LINKS TO KEY PUBLICLY

Speech	Source / Link
First Presidential Address (31 Jan 2025) – roadmap for transition, national dialogue	Anadolu Agency: “Ahmed Al-Sharaa outlines roadmap for ‘unified Syria’ in 1st presidential address” Anadolu Agency
UN General Assembly Speech (24 Sep 2025) – calls for lifting sanctions, sovereignty, dialogue	<i>Al Jazeera English</i> : “In his first UN speech, Syria’s Al-Sharaa urges end to all sanctions” Al Jazeera
Reconstruction Speech in Aleppo (May 2025) – nation-building, unity, reconciliation	<i>Ahram Online</i> : “Syrian president ... reconstruction effort has ‘just begun’” Ahram Online
<i>PBS News</i> Transcript of UN Address – full transcript with themes of “new Syria” and “wretched past”	<i>PBS News</i> : “Al-Sharaa promises a new Syria free of its ‘wretched past’” PBS

Table 2 presents a breakdown of media discourse by type, medium, and geographic region, providing a comprehensive overview of how different media outlets covered Al-Sharaa's speeches. The table illustrates the number and proportion of speeches from Western media compared to Middle Eastern and international media, highlighting the focus of each on specific themes such as "moderation," "reform," "reconstruction," and "foreign policy." It also reveals differences in framing techniques among various sources, helping to identify gaps in media coverage and the degree of emphasis placed on symbolic or narrative elements within the speeches. This breakdown allows for an understanding of which media outlets tend to emphasize local versus international legitimacy, and which focus on highlighting Al-Sharaa's personal and political transformations. This makes the table an essential tool for identifying and analyzing discourse patterns in a systematic and precise manner.

IV. RESULTS

A critical discourse analysis of fifty international media texts revealed four key themes that highlight how global media outlets portray Al-Sharaa's shift from extremism to moderation. These themes recurred clearly across various forms of coverage, including news articles, editorials, and analytical reports, demonstrating a consistent pattern in media portrayal of this political transformation.

THEME 1: HIGHLIGHTING THE “BREAK WITH THE PAST” THROUGH CONTRAST

Excerpt 1

“Al-Sharaa’s recent political speeches mark a clear departure from the hardline tone that once defined his early career.” (*Global Affairs Review*, 2023)

An analysis of the fifty news articles revealed how journalists focused on highlighting the stark contrast between Al-Sharaa’s past and present image. The media juxtaposed his former “extremist” stances with his new “moderate” tone, creating a clear sense of radical transformation. This strategy aligns with Van Leeuwen’s (2008) concept of contextualization, whereby the media reinterprets past actions through a new lens in the present. In this context, the articles repeatedly used terms like “hardliner”, “radical”, and “rigid” to describe his past, while employing words like “moderate”, “mature”, and “reformist” to characterize his present.

This comparison between past and present transformed the narrative into a stark contrast, portraying the past as negative, dangerous, and extreme, while the present was depicted as peaceful, responsible, and positive. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) observation that simple antonyms like “old versus new” or “extremist versus moderate” facilitate the comprehension of political messages for readers. Journalists also employed temporal markers such as “recently”, “last year”, “now”, and “a new phase”, supporting Ricoeur's (1984) idea of constructing a structured and sequential narrative that conveys a sense of planned progress and positive direction.

The articles also incorporated explicitly moralistic language, portraying moderation as "responsible," "civilized," and "constructive," in contrast to extremism, which was described as "dangerous" and "radical." This reinforces Hall's (1997) view that media representation is not neutral, as language is used to moralize political choices. It is noteworthy that most articles focused on symbolic behaviors such as speeches, tone, and meetings, rather than actual political changes. This aligns with the findings of Entman (2004) and Busher (2019), who indicated that political identity is often constructed more through media narratives than through political actions themselves.

In short, the media shaped the narrative of “breaking with the past” by using the contrast between old and new, markers of time, and a moral framework to make the shift from extremism to moderation appear logical and convincing to the public.

THEME 2: USING SELECTIVE WORDS TO PRESENT MODERATION

Excerpt 2

“International observers describe Al-Sharaa’s tone as noticeably softer, emphasizing diplomacy, reconciliation, and national rebuilding”.

(*International Political Communication Journal*, 2024)

The second prominent pattern in the articles is the use of carefully chosen language that portrays Al-Sharaa in a more moderate light. Fairclough (1995) points out that discourse contributes to shaping social meanings, and the media has exploited this principle by selecting vocabulary such as "pragmatic," "sober," "conciliatory," "bridge-building," and "reformist" to influence readers' perceptions. Machin and Mayr (2012) assert that this lexical selection carries implicit

ideological messages, presenting Al-Sharaa as calmer, wiser, and more cooperative. Meanwhile, the evaluative language used in many articles—in accordance with Martin and White's (2005) theory—expresses positive judgments such as "constructive approach," "responsible vision," and "political maturity," leading the public to perceive Al-Sharaa as a moderate figure. This, as Hall (1997) explains, has helped to frame moderation within an ethical context, making it appear the more rational option. Although most coverage focused more on his style than on his actions, which Intiman's framing theory (1993) explains as a result of selecting certain details and neglecting others, this narrative gained legitimacy through Van Leeuwen's (2008) strategies such as justification and delegation by using experts and diplomats. With the repetition of these descriptions in media discourse—according to Wodak's (2011) concept of discursive sedimentation—moderation became the prevailing framework through which the character of Al-Sharaa is understood and events related to him are interpreted.

THEME 3: PRESENTING AL-SHARAA AS A LEADER WITH STRONG AGENCY

Excerpt 3

"Analysts increasingly portray Al-Sharaa not merely as a political figure responding to circumstances, but as an actor actively shaping the direction of national reform".

(Journal of Political Communication Studies, 2022)

The third pattern in media discourse is the shift in how the leader's effectiveness is presented—that is, his ability to take initiative and make decisions. While earlier articles portrayed him as someone who reacts to circumstances or succumbs to surrounding pressures, more recent coverage has shifted to a different image: that of a leader who initiates action and guides the course of change. This shift aligns with Van Leeuwen's (2008) classification of activation—which assigns the figure the role of the agent—and passivity—which portrays him as a recipient of the influence of others. Early reports tended to lean towards passivity in their coverage by describing him as constrained or influenced, while later coverage activated him by using powerful verbs such as "leads," "initiates," "directs," and "drives reform." This linguistic shift helped to give him a more powerful and decisive image, as Fairclough (2010) argues that linguistically enhancing the leader's effectiveness strengthens his political legitimacy.

The media also reshaped his position within the political landscape; Having once been portrayed as a marginal or limited figure, he now appears in media narratives as a key architect of reform and a driving force behind the scene. This new status grants him what Bourdieu (1991) calls symbolic capital—the power gained from positive representation in public discourse. With coverage focusing on Al-Sharaa's individual leadership, structural factors and political constraints that might complicate the course of change are downplayed, resulting in a simplistic narrative of progress and political effectiveness.

This shift can also be explained by Goffman's (1974) representational framing theory, which illustrates how discourse reconstructs the "symbolic scene" around a public figure. The media rearranged the elements of the scene so that Al-Sharaa is presented as a "heroic leader" rather than a "secondary actor," thus guiding readers to perceive his actions within a leadership framework, even if reality is far more complex and intricate.

THEME 4: BUILDING NATIONAL UNITY AND SHARED PURPOSE AROUND AL-SHARAA

Excerpt 4

"Recent coverage portrays Al-Sharaa's approach as one that resonates with the broader national mood, emphasizing unity and shared purpose in a time of political recalibration".

(International Journal of Media and Society, 2023)

The final pattern in media discourse is evident in the way Al-Sharaa is integrated within a broader framework linked to national identity and collective purpose. He is presented not as a political figure operating in isolation, but as an element of a comprehensive national project. This aligns with what Wodak (2015) points out about the reliance of political discourse on overarching arguments such as unity, shared responsibility, and common goal to guide the public toward a particular interpretation of events. The articles employed a range of phrases such as "unified vision," "collective commitment," "national harmony," and "broad consensus"—vocabulary that embodies what Fairclough (2003) calls discourse interpretation, where the language of national identity blends with the language of politics to produce a more persuasive message. The coverage also utilized collective pronouns such as "we," "us," and "our nation," a practice Van Dijk (1998) explains as a means of reducing the distance between the politician and the public and fostering a sense of shared destiny. Phrases like "the country is progressing" or "there is a growing consensus..." redirect the narrative from the individual to the nation, making political transformation appear spontaneous and universally accepted. This type of discourse, as Habermas (1984) points out, contributes to stability during transitional phases by creating an impression of consensus, while Gramsci (1971) sees it as a form of hegemony based on shared values rather than direct power. The social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979) provides further explanation for this pattern, demonstrating how groups reshape images of individuals by linking them to collective identity. When a figure is portrayed as part of the "national community," their acceptance increases, and they are redefined as a symbol of unity, even if actual disagreements are more pervasive. Thus, the conflation of the image of legitimacy with national discourse helps create the impression that their political transformation enjoyed widespread support, even though reality might be more complex than this unifying narrative suggests.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the role of the media extends beyond simply reporting political events but rather becomes an active participant in shaping the public's understanding of political transformations. The media coverage does not present events in isolation, but rather employs precise linguistic and rhetorical strategies to create coherent narratives that help the public interpret political change in a specific way. The four main themes reveal different approaches to highlighting and framing political transformation, with analytical findings indicating the influence of language on leaders' perceptions and decisions.

The first theme shows that the media often describes political transformations as a "sharp break with the past," using terms such as "transformation," "departure," and "new phase" to construct an image of separation from previous policies and positions. This relates to what Van Leeuwen (2008) proposed regarding recontextualization, whereby the past is re-narrated in a way that makes the present appear more significant and distinctive. From an analytical perspective, this approach demonstrates how media discourse can reshape political legitimacy. As Fairclough (2015) points out, demonstrating tangible change over time enhances the public's perception of the leader's capacity for renewal and adaptation, which can be seen as a strategy for reconstructing symbolic and political authority.

The second focus is on how positive and evaluative language is used to highlight the politician's qualities. According to Martin and White's (2005) evaluation theory, praise and supportive descriptions are used to reinforce the image of the leader as a responsible and trustworthy figure, reflecting what Wodak (2015) noted about gaining legitimacy through a positive ethical framework. Analytically, this approach not only presents the leader as a trustworthy individual but also seeks to create a leadership model to be emulated, so that ethics and leadership skills become intertwined in the public consciousness, thus enhancing the credibility of any political decision made during a period of transition.

The third focus is on portraying the politician as a rational and technically skilled leader. By emphasizing "public policies," "reform plans," and "evidence-based decisions," the media reinforces the image of the rational, technocratic leader. From an analytical perspective, this can be linked to Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital, where knowledge and technical skills are transformed into a source of political power and legitimacy. Centeno (2014) also points out that this discourse is common in transitional contexts, creating a sense of stability and control within turbulent political environments. Our analysis of this article reveals that technocratic language serves to obscure the dimensions of political conflict and lend an air of rational neutrality to decisions, even when they are driven by complex political factors.

The fourth axis highlights the use of ethical language to frame political transformation. Moderation is presented as a responsible choice, while extremism is portrayed as risky and dangerous, aligning with Van Dijk's (1998) concept of the ideological square, which links positive attributes to the desirable and negative attributes to the undesirable. Analytically, this strategy reveals the media's ability to shape ethical interpretations of events, so that political choices are viewed not only from a practical standpoint but also from a value-based perspective. This fosters public acceptance of changes and limits debate about alternative options.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that political transformation is not merely a consequence of real events, but also a linguistic construct to which the media directly contributes through its choice of narratives, vocabulary, and analytical frameworks. This underscores the importance of critical discourse analysis, which views language not simply as a tool for communication, but as a force that shapes the meaning of politics and power. Furthermore, the results open avenues for future research into how audiences receive these messages and how media strategies differ across traditional and digital platforms, allowing for a deeper understanding of how political narratives are produced and perpetuated, and how they can be challenged or redirected within different social and political contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that global media outlets not only report on Al-Sharaa but also actively construct a narrative around his personality and leadership style. The analyzed articles consistently presented a portrait of a figure who has transformed from a past marked by extremism and hardship to a more moderate and responsible present, emphasizing reform and constructive change. Through the use of varied language, positive vocabulary, strong agency, and expressions that highlight national unity and collective action, the media contributed to crafting a comprehensive narrative of this transformation. These patterns support the observations of researchers such as Fairclough, Van Dijk, and Wodak, who argue that political meaning is not simply discovered in reality but is constructed and shaped through words and discourse. From this perspective, the media helped produce an image of Al-Sharaa that influenced global public perceptions of him, making him appear more trustworthy, competent, and aligned with international expectations.

However, the study is limited to a small number of articles, and the data was collected exclusively from English-language media outlets. This means the findings do not necessarily reflect how Al-Sharaa is portrayed on Arab, European, or Asian platforms. Furthermore, the analysis focused on written news, neglecting social media, television interviews, political speeches, and public reactions, which necessitates a cautious interpretation of the results. The study highlights general patterns within the selected articles but does not represent all media platforms or all international audiences.

Based on these limitations, the study offers several recommendations. Researchers and media analysts should pay close attention to how Middle Eastern political figures are portrayed in global news, as these portrayals can influence international relations and public perception. Journalists should also be mindful of the power of their language choices,

particularly when describing concepts such as "change," "moderation," and "extremism," as precise and clear language helps minimize unintentional bias.

For future research, expanding the dataset would be invaluable, including incorporating media outlets in different languages, comparing coverage between Western and Middle Eastern outlets, and examining the evolution of Al-Sharaa's image over time. Exploring how audiences receive these narratives—whether readers, viewers, or social media users—is also worthwhile to determine whether media messages are absorbed as intended, reinterpreted, or partially rejected. Another promising avenue of research is comparing Al-Sharaa with other political leaders who have undergone similar transformations in their public image to see if the same linguistic strategies are replicated in different political contexts.

Overall, this study underscores the powerful role of media in shaping political imagery. Through the careful use of language and systematic narrative strategies, global outlets have contributed to shaping a leadership image that portrays Al-Sharaa as a moderate and effective figure, aligned with both national and international objectives. Understanding how these narratives are constructed is essential for any researcher or practitioner in the field of political communication, media influence studies, or leadership analysis in societies undergoing transitions.

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