



## Conceptual Metaphors in Al Mayadeen Regarding Opposition Groups' Attacks on Bashar Al Assad's Regime

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Submission: 27-02-2026

Revised: 28-03-2026

Accepted: 28-04-2026

Published: 31-05-2026

### Abstract

Amid the proliferation of issues covered by the Middle Eastern media, linguistic analysis is crucial for uncovering ideological biases and underlying perspective in the coverage. This study aimed to analyze the conceptual metaphors present in Al Mayadeen's coverage of opposition group attacks against the Bashar Al Assad regime, as well as to examine the influence of social practices on the channel's media ideology. The study employed a qualitative descriptive method, with data collected through an observation and note-taking technique from four news articles between November 28–29, 2024. The data were analyzed using Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory and Norman Fairclough's social practice theory. The results revealed that Al Mayadeen shaped perceptions of the conflict through specific metaphors, consistently portraying the opposition as terrorist actors and the regime as the defensive force. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of cognitive semantics and critical discourse analysis to examine one of the 2024 Syrian conflicts. Practically, this research contributes to strengthening media literacy policies and monitoring international journalism to filter out ideological narratives and propaganda in global conflict.

**Keywords:** Arabic, Conceptual Metaphor, Syria, Bashar al-Assad

### Abstrak

*Di tengah maraknya isu yang diliput media Timur Tengah, analisis bahasa menjadi penting untuk membongkar bias informasi dalam isu yang diliput. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis metafora konseptual yang terdapat pada media Al Mayadeen mengenai serangan kelompok oposisi terhadap Rezim Bashar Al Assad serta pengaruh praktik sosial terhadap ideologi medianya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan pengumpulan datanya menggunakan teknik simak dan catat pada empat artikel berita 28–29 November 2024. Data dianalisis menggunakan teori metafora konseptual Lakoff dan Jhonson serta praktik sosial Norman Fairclough. Hasilnya menunjukkan Al Mayadeen membentuk persepsi konflik melalui metafora tertentu, yang secara konsisten merepresentasikan oposisi sebagai aktor teroris dan rezim sebagai pihak defensif. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada integrasi semantik kognitif dan analisis wacana kritis dalam membedah salah satu konflik Suriah 2024. Secara praktis, penelitian ini bermanfaat pada penguatan kebijakan literasi media dan pemantauan jurnalisme internasional guna menyaring narasi ideologis serta propaganda dalam konflik global.*

**Kata kunci:** Bahasa Arab, Metafora Konseptual, Suriah, Bashar al Assad



## A. INTRODUCTION

Language plays an important role as an instrument in constructing social reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; van Dijk, 1998). In the context of news media, language not only functions as a tool for conveying information objectively, but also as a means of framing an event (Entman, 1993). News media, through their choice of diction, sentence structure, and other linguistic devices, actively shape the audience's perception and understanding of the world (Fairclough, 2003). Especially in covering sensitive and tense political events, such as armed conflicts or civil wars, the way the media narrates events can influence public opinion, legitimize one side, and delegitimize the other (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

This is where the role of conceptual metaphors becomes important. Metaphors are no longer viewed merely as rhetorical devices; rather, they are understood as a cognitive mechanism through which individuals conceptualized abstract phenomena in terms of more concrete and familiar experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In political discourse and news, conceptual metaphors serve as powerful tools of persuasion. For example, metaphors such as "Opposition is a disease" or "Conflict is a game" can implicitly shape the way audiences assess a political situation.

The Syrian conflict has entered a critical new phase, remaining a focal point for Middle Eastern media due to its shifting geopolitical alliances. In late 2024, the conflict witnessed a significant escalation as opposition groups, led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), launched their largest offensive in years, successfully capturing strategic territories like Aleppo for the first time since 2016 (UN OHCHR, 2024). This sudden surge in violence provided a fresh and urgent reality to examine how media outlets frame renewed hostilities. Amidst this, Al Mayadeen, a Lebanon-based network, occupies a unique editorial position. Established as an alternative to the "mainstream" Arab narratives of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, Al Mayadeen is often perceived as a "resistance media" aligned with the pro-Assad axis (Crone, 2020). However, most recent linguistic studies on the Syrian conflict have focused on Western or pro-opposition media, leaving a significant gap in understanding how pro-government leaning media such as Al Mayadeen utilize conceptual metaphors to construct the identity of "terrorists" versus "defenders" during the 2024 escalation.

Previous studies have examined metaphor usage to contextualize this gap. Fathurrohim et al. (2024) explored "building" metaphors in Al Jazeera's boycott discourse, while Eldin et al. (2023) analyzed the framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through leadership speeches. Furthermore, Artha (2023) and Maalej (2024) investigated metaphors in political speeches and dehumanization tactics in the Gaza war. Lastly, Fathurrohim et al. (2024) examined war metaphors as ideological weapons in Al Jazeera.

Despite these valuable insights, a clear research gap persists. Most existing literature focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian issue or utilizes data from Al Jazeera, which possesses a distinct ideological bias. There is a scarcity of research specifically analyzing the 2024 Syrian escalation through the lens of Al Mayadeen's news discourse. This gap is particularly evident in the limited linguistic evidence explaining how media outlets that oppose the Syrian opposition ideologically reframe military setbacks as narratives of resilience and resistance. To address this issue, this study focused on four news articles published during the peak of the offensive (November 26 – December 8, 2024). By integrating Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory with Fairclough's (2003) Social Practice analysis, this research seeks to advance understanding of contemporary media propaganda and ideological construction in the evolving Syrian landscape.

From the previous literature review, there appears to be a significant research gap. First, although metaphor analysis in Arab media already exists, the application of in-depth Conceptual Metaphor theory to Al Mayadeen media is still very limited. Second, studies that take data from Middle Eastern issues often discuss conflicts in general, namely Israel-Palestine, but none have specifically examined how metaphors are used to construct the conflict in Syria, particularly regarding the opposition group's attacks on the Bashar Al Assad regime, as well as the social practices that factor into Al Mayadeen Media's bias towards one side.

Therefore, the novelty proposed by the researcher in this article lies in three aspects: (1) the application of conceptual metaphor theory to Al Mayadeen news media, which is known to have a pro-Syrian government editorial position; (2) a specific focus on the representation of "opposition groups" in the context of attacks; and (3) the identification of conceptual mappings used by Al Mayadeen to frame actors and events in the conflict, which contributes to an understanding of media ideology in the Middle East;

(4) And analyzing Al Mayadeen's social practices and its relationship with Syria and the conflict involving opposition group's attacks against the Bashar Al Assad regime, as an important external factor shaping language use.

Based on the background and identified research gaps, this study formulated a fundamental question regarding how language, particularly metaphors, is ideologically operated by Al Mayadeen. The main question is how the media cognitively and linguistically represents the opposition group's attacks against Bashar Al-Assad's regime to its audience. To address this, the study focused on identifying and classifying the dominant conceptual metaphors while examining the social practices that act as external factors influencing the language.

In order to position this research within the existing academic landscape, the author reviews at least three closely relevant studies. First, Fathurrohman et al. (2024) analyzed building metaphors in Al Jazeera's boycott discourse to uncover pro-Palestinian resistance ideology. Second, Eldin et al. (2023) examined how metaphors are used by Israeli and Palestinian leaders to frame conflict dynamics. Third, Maalej (2024) investigated the dehumanization of Palestinians through animal metaphors used by Israeli officials. These studies shared a fundamental similarity with the current research in their application of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to expose ideological biases in political conflicts.

However, this research differed significantly from previous works in terms of its object of study and chronological context. While most existing literature focused on the Israeli-Palestinian issue or utilized data from Al Jazeera, this study shifted the focus to Al Mayadeen, a media outlet with a distinct pro-resistance editorial line that has been under-researched. The novelty of this research lies in its real-time analysis of the December 2024 Syrian escalation, combined with a unique integration of CMT and Norman Fairclough's Social Practice analysis. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how external geopolitical factors—specifically Al Mayadeen's institutional opposition to mainstream Arab narratives—shape the choice of metaphors in representing the Syrian conflict.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a critical linguistic approach, utilizing a combination of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary research methods. The researcher acted as the key instrument in identifying and interpreting metaphorical expressions within four news articles purposively sampled from the Al Mayadeen portal (<https://www.almayadeen.net/>) published between November 28 and 29, 2024 a period representing the decisive "Deterrence of Aggression" offensive in the Syrian conflict. Data were collected using the *simak-catat* (observation and note-taking) technique and analyzed through a three-stage procedure: identifying metaphorical expressions, mapping source-to-target domains based on CMT, and interpreting ideological implications via Fairclough's three-dimensional social practice model. To ensure data credibility and validity, this research applied theory triangulation by cross-referencing linguistic findings with contemporary geopolitical reports and utilized expert judgment through peer-review discussions to validate the accuracy of the metaphorical mappings and ideological interpretations.

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive method to explain a phenomenon or event descriptively in order to obtain a clear picture of the object being studied. The data were presented, described, interpreted, and concluded in accordance with qualitative analytical procedures.

Overall, the study focused on news discourse as its primary data source. The data collection technique used by the author is the listen and note technique (Sudaryanto, 2015), in which the author listens to the text and also notes relevant data for analysis. Data was collected from news articles published at the end of November 2024. The news articles can be accessed at the following links: Article 1 <https://bit.ly/AlMayadeenArtikel1>, Article 2 <https://bit.ly/AlMayadeenArtikel2>, Article 3 <https://bit.ly/AlMayadeenArtikel3>, and Article 4 <https://bit.ly/4oxC7OD>. After the data was collected and classified, the author analyzed it using the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, and then analyzed the social practices using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis theory.

## C. RESULTS DAN DISCUSSION

### Results

Based on an analysis of four Al Mayadeen news articles published on November 28–29, 2024, five conceptual metaphors were found to be used in representing the opposition group's attacks on Bashar al-Assad's regime. All metaphors presented in this section were the result of linguistic data processing in the form of lexical units and metaphorical phrases, which were then classified based on the relationship between the source domain and the target domain.

The distribution of conceptual metaphors identified in the data presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Conceptual Metaphor

No	quotation	Translate	The concept of metaphor
1	المعارك تدور رحاها على جبهتين	Battles revolve (grind) on two fronts	Battles are a mechanism
2	كي لا تقع في فخ المخطط الأميركي الإسرائيلي	So as not to fall into the trap of the American- Israeli plan	Threats are traps
3	الجيش السوري امتصاص الهجمة القوية	Syrian army absorbs strong attack	The attack is fluid
4	إعادة تنشيط الجماعات الإرهابية	Reactivating terrorist groups	Action is the engine
5	جولة جديدة	A new chapter in the battle	Conflict is a game

Source: Al Mayadeen

The results indicated that each conceptual metaphor appears once in the analyzed dataset, with variations in the source domain covering mechanisms, space, nature, and games. These metaphors were used to describe various aspects of conflict, ranging from the dynamics of battle, the nature of threats, the intensity of attacks, to the continuity of conflict as a series of events.

The presentation of conceptual metaphors in Al Mayadeen news showed a tendency to use concrete and familiar experiences as a means of conceptualizing abstract and complex military conflict events.

## Discussion

### 1. Conceptual Metaphors

This section discusses the meaning and function of conceptual metaphors found in Al Mayadeen's coverage of opposition attacks against Bashar al-Assad's regime. The discussion focuses on how these metaphors function as cognitive devices to frame conflict events, in accordance with the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

#### a. Battles are a mechanism

The metaphor of battle is a mechanism reflected in the expression المعارك تدور رحاها على جبهتين ("battles spin/grind on two fronts"). In this metaphor, conflict is understood through the realm of mechanical sources, specifically grinding machines that work continuously and systematically. The use of the verb *tadūru raḥāhā* (to turn/operate) transfers the characteristics of a machine—continuous, impersonal, and automatic—to the realm of military conflict.

Cognitively, this metaphor frames battle not as an incidental event, but as an ongoing process with its own logic. Thus, conflict is represented as something that "moves" and "works," rather than as sporadic chaos. This pattern is in line with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) view that metaphors enable the understanding of abstract events through the structure of concrete experiences that are familiar to the audience.

#### b. Threats are traps

The metaphor of threat is a trap that appears in the phrase كي لا تقع في فخ المخطط الأميركي الإسرائيلي ("so as not to fall into the trap of the American-Israeli plan"). The spatial domain of the trap contains hidden, ensnaring, and dangerous characteristics, which are then projected onto the target domain of political-military threats.

Through this metaphor, the threat is not described as an open attack, but rather as something cunning and strategically designed. The use of the verb *taqa'a* (to fall) reinforces the image of an unwary victim. In a conceptual metaphor perspective, this mapping directs the audience to understand the threat as a situation that demands vigilance and caution, not merely military force (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

c. The attack is fluid

The metaphor of attack is fluid in the expression الجيش السوري امتصاص الهجمة القوية (“the Syrian army absorbed the strong attack”). The word *imtiṣāṣ* (to absorb) comes from the realm of physical experience with fluids, which is then transferred to the realm of military conflict.

In this metaphor, an attack is understood as something that flows and can be absorbed, rather than a rigid collision. This conceptualization gives the impression that an attack has intensity and pressure, but can still be controlled. Cognitively, the fluid metaphor helps the audience understand the dynamics of power in conflict—that attacks can come in waves, but their impact can also be mitigated or reduced. This shows how metaphors work to simplify the complexity of conflict through familiar sensory experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

d. Action is the engine

The action metaphor is evident in the phrase إعادة تنشيط الجماعات الإرهابية (“reactivating terrorist groups”). The word *tanṣīt* (to activate) is lexically related to mechanical processes, such as turning on or starting a machine.

Through this metaphor, the actions of opposition groups are conceptualized as a mechanical system that can be activated, stopped, or restarted. This mapping removes elements of spontaneity or emotion, replacing them with images of systematic and planned work. Within the framework of conceptual metaphor, this shows how human actions can be understood as part of a structurally operating mechanism (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

e. Conflict is a game

The metaphor of conflict is represented in the expression جولة جديدة (“new round”). The domain of the game emphasizes stages, turns, and continuity, which are then projected onto the domain of armed conflict.

This metaphor frames conflict as a series of recurring and phased events, rather than as a single event. The use of the concept of “rounds” implies that the conflict is ongoing and has not yet reached its end. From a cognitive perspective, the game metaphor helps the audience understand conflict as a long-term process with ups and downs, as described in conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

## 2. Social Practice

This analysis is based on the assumption that broader social contexts outside media production influence how discourse appears in the media texts, including social, political, economic, and ideological contexts that underlie the production of discourse. This analysis of social practices is divided into three levels, namely the situational, institutional, and social levels.

### a. Situational

To understand the Syrian conflict in late 2024 more comprehensively, it is necessary to consider the background behind the opposition groups' attack on Bashar Al Assad's regime. This is a prolonged conflict, especially after Bashar Al Assad was elected president to replace his father, Hafez Al Assad, in 2000. Under his dictatorial leadership, the Syrian people were subjected to many unfair and harmful policies (Antara, 2024). Bashar Al Assad relied on security forces and massive propaganda to maintain his power.

The Arab Spring spread to Syria in 2011, where large-scale protests emerged calling for the end of authoritarian rule under leader Bashar Al Assad. The demonstrations turned into armed conflict after the security forces cracked down hard. As a result, more than 580,000 people, the majority of whom were civilians, were reported to have died as a consequence of the prolonged civil war. The Bashar Al Assad regime has been accused of war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons to cripple anyone who dared to oppose his rule, such as the Sarin gas attack in Ghouta in 2013 (Antara, 2024).

At the end of 2024, a coalition of armed opposition groups in Syria led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham launched a major wave of attacks called Deterrence of Aggression, targeting areas controlled by Bashar al-Assad's regime in the northwestern part of the country, particularly in the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama. This offensive was the largest since the 2020 Idlib ceasefire and reportedly succeeded in capturing a number of cities, villages, and strategic areas from government forces in a short period (ACLED, 2024; Wikipedia, 2024a). In Aleppo, previously one of the regime's main strongholds, opposition forces launched a cross-front attack that forced government forces to retreat, while massive attacks continued against the regime's defensive positions around the provincial capital (Al Jazeera, 2024; Wikipedia, 2024a).

During this offensive, Bashar al-Assad's regime was in a significant defensive position. Defeats in many areas show that regime forces are under heavy pressure to defend rather than launch counterattacks. Fighting around Hama shows that opposition groups are not only capable of encircling areas, but also forcing the regime to retreat its forces (AA, 2024; ACLED, 2024). The regime's position is further exacerbated by the need to rely on air support from allies such as Russia to withstand opposition attacks, which also reflects the regime's military limitations in independently facing this massive wave of attacks (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Based on the conflict situation that led to a wave of attacks by opposition groups in late November to early December 2024, it can be concluded that Al Mayadeen displays a clear ideological bias in favor of the Bashar al-Assad regime through a complex strategy of narration and intertextuality in its news articles. In its news narrative, Al Mayadeen systematically represents the Syrian regime as a defensive actor facing security threats and defending the country's sovereignty, while opposition groups are almost always represented as "terrorist groups" attacking territories and civilians. Furthermore, in the context of regional conflict following Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Gaza, Al Mayadeen claims that opposition group attacks on Syria are a project of Israel and its allies.

#### b. Institutional

Al Mayadeen is a news media network based in Beirut, Lebanon, officially launched on June 11, 2012 (Al Mayadeen About Us, 2025). This media outlet was founded by Ghassan bin Jeddo, an Arab journalist who previously served as the head of Al Jazeera's Beirut bureau and resigned due to his disagreement with Al Jazeera's coverage of the Syrian conflict and Palestinian issues (Al Mayadeen About Us, 2025; Wikipedia, 2025). Institutionally, Al Mayadeen claims to be an independent media outlet that focuses its reporting on pan-Arab issues, Arab nationalism, Islamic solidarity, and resistance to external domination, particularly by Israel and the West (Al Mayadeen About Us, 2025). On its official website, Al Mayadeen states its commitment to values such as international relations, cultural tolerance, and the right to resist foreign occupation, including placing the Palestinian issue at the core of its reporting and supporting the Palestinian people's right to free themselves from occupation (Al Mayadeen About Us, 2025). These values form part of a recurring ideological framework in its coverage and programming,

demonstrating an editorial orientation that places regional geopolitical issues in the context of national emancipation and Arab solidarity.

Furthermore, academic studies on discourse construction in Al Mayadeen showed that this media outlet has actively used threat narratives and enemy image formation since its inception. The study argued that Al Mayadeen constructs threat narratives through a process of othering actors who are viewed as ideologically different, integrating broader political and ideological strategies in framing the reality of regional conflict (othering and threat narratives) (Crone, 2020). It also highlights the Palestinian issue and portrays Israel as part of a common threat to the Arab world, so that the structural image of the institution shapes an editorial direction that is consistent with these values and ideological orientations.

### c. Social

Lebanon exhibits a fragmented political reality due to its sectarian system, in which state positions are divided based on religious identity (the president is Maronite Christian, the prime minister is Sunni, and the speaker of parliament is Shia). This social practice fosters strong sectarian identities, causing citizens to prioritize loyalty to their religious groups over Lebanese nationalism. The political elite then exploits religious sentiment to maintain their support base, keeping the country fragile and prone to division. This situation is exacerbated by geopolitical competition between Iran (which supports the Shiites) and Saudi Arabia (which supports the Sunnis), with the Syrian conflict having a direct impact on social dynamics in Lebanon, particularly in terms of Sunni and Shiite sympathies and support.

In this context, Al Mayadeen emerged as a media outlet aligned with the Iran-Hezbollah-Assad axis of influence. This media outlet exploited sectarian divisions to frame the fall of the Assad regime as a threat to regional stability and as a “line of defense” against Sunni extremism, which was feared to destroy Lebanon's balance. Al Mayadeen does not merely report, but also constructs an ideological narrative that justifies the actions of the Syrian regime and the role of Hezbollah, making it a media outlet that is defensive against Western and Gulf influence, while also being offensive in voicing the ideology of “resistance.”

Al Mayadeen's position is further strengthened when considering Hezbollah's strategic relationship with Damascus. Hezbollah views the survival of the Assad regime

as an existential necessity because Syria is a logistical route and source of military support from Iran. In social practice, Al Mayadeen functions as a tool of moral legitimacy for Hezbollah, providing space for pro-government narratives and positioning Hezbollah's military presence in Syria as a defensive effort. Thus, this media outlet plays a role in creating a closed circle of information, in which Assad is seen as the only bulwark against sectarian chaos in Lebanon.

The phenomenon of Syrian refugees adds to Lebanon's social complexity, as this small country is home to more than one million refugees. This issue is not only humanitarian in nature, but also triggers social friction and demographic fears. The dominance of Sunni refugees is seen as threatening Lebanon's sectarian political balance, turning the refugee issue into a matter of national security. Al Mayadeen then shifts the discourse from humanitarianism to security, justifying the Assad regime's violence as a solution to stop the "terrorist threat" that is seen as prolonging the conflict. In this way, the media framed support for Assad as a necessity to save Lebanon's social structure from destruction due to the burden of refugees.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study successfully fulfills its research objectives by identifying that Al Mayadeen consistently employs a range of conceptual metaphors—such as battle as a mechanism, threat as a trap, attack as a liquid, action as a machine, and conflict as a game—to represent the opposition's attacks on the Bashar Al-Assad regime. These metaphors function as cognitive mechanism that simplify the complex 2024 Syrian escalation for the audience while embedding a specific ideological bias. By mapping these source domains, the research revealed a consistent framing strategy that represents the opposition groups as destabilizing terrorist actors and positions the Syrian regime as a defensive entity protecting state sovereignty. This ideological construction is further reinforced by social practices across situational, institutional, and social levels, which align Al Mayadeen's discourse with the geopolitical interests of the "axis of resistance."

The findings of this research have significant implications, for media policy and communication studies, particularly in the field of international relations. Practically, this study underscored the urgent necessity of enhancing media literacy policies that empower the audiences to critically discern ideological framing and metaphorical

propaganda in international conflict reporting. Furthermore, for media regulators and international journalism observers, these results emphasized the importance of monitoring editorial biases that may exacerbate regional polarization. Policies aimed at promoting multi-perspective journalism are essential to counteracting the "dehumanization" narratives often embedded in metaphorical discourse, thereby fostering a more objective understanding of global geopolitical crises.

Finally, while this study provides an in-depth analysis of Al Mayadeen's linguistic strategies, it also opens avenues for future research. To broaden the academic understanding of this phenomenon, subsequent studies should consider a comparative analysis between pro-regime media like Al Mayadeen and pro-opposition outlets such as Al Jazeera or Western-based media to see how the same events are metaphorically "re-packaged." Additionally, future researchers could explore the impact of these conceptual metaphors on digital audience engagement across social media platforms or utilize a broader corpus to track the evolution of these metaphors as the Syrian conflict continues to shift.

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