

The Power of Misinformation and Propaganda in the Syrian Civil War

Shaping Narratives and Perception

The Syrian Civil War, fought between pro-democratic insurgents and the established regime of President Bashar al-Assad, has been a protracted conflict, shaping the Middle East's geopolitical landscape since its outbreak in 2011. The resultant suffering and refugee crisis have made it one of the most severe humanitarian disasters in recent history. Disinformation and propaganda, which have become potent weapons in today's politically charged world, have contributed significantly to the amplification of the uncertainty that comes with the war: in other words, these tools produce and shape what is known as the “fog of war”. This paper aims to demonstrate that the deliberate dissemination of false information and propaganda tactics not only deepens the complexities of the war but also significantly impacts policy decisions and the overall dynamics of the war, ultimately hindering conflict resolution.

The Distortion of Reality

The conflict in Syria has been fought not only on the ground but also in the realm of propaganda and misinformation (Ali, 2011). Various international actors have contributed to shaping and manipulating the narratives concerning it, with the diverse media approaches and (un)availability of information complicating the perception of the Civil War. The most significant instances of propaganda are to be found in Syria's own media world. According to The Guardian “. . . the regime has . . . sought to portray Assad as a reformer – with a westernised wife to boot – who is adored by his people. . . . Children are taught to exalt Assad and his father, while schoolbooks describe Syria as one of the most powerful nations on the planet” (Ali, 2011). Assad's authoritarian power has made it easier for him and his allies to “avoid accountability” for their war crimes (Kousta, 2022). As stated by Posetti and Matthews (2018, p. 6), “[i]n April 2017, President Assad said reports of a chemical attack that killed 89 people were ‘100 percent fabrications’. He suggested that photographs showing children who had died in the attack on a rebel-held town were staged, describing the entire incident as ‘fabricated’ and ‘unconvincing.’”. Despite the propagandists' efforts, “Only a small minority of Syrians believe this narrative, which is contradicted by satellite channels such as al-Jazeera and material on the net” (Ali, 2011). However, it is worth asking whether society may remain immune to the official narrative for long (Ali, 2011).

Foreign Influence

The long-standing division among global powers over Syria has significantly influenced international relations and the country's internal conflict. While nations such as the United States and the EU imposed sanctions on the Assad regime, the Syrian president received unwavering support from his allies, like Russia and Iran. In 2011, the former state blocked “a UN Security Council Resolution that would have condemned Assad’s crackdown” (Britannica, 2023). Furthermore, Russia has reinforced the Syrian regime’s narrative by intertwining the historical identities of the two nations. Russian officials have adopted a rhetoric that exalts Syria, proclaiming, "This is our land... our sacred land!... Civilization came to us precisely from there... If there was no Syria, there would be no Russia” (Borshchevskaya, 2015). Moreover, Russia portrays the West as terrorists responsible for instigating the civil war, using historical references and past events to fortify their stance (Borshchevskaya, 2015). By backing Assad staunchly, Russia has effectively equipped his government with a compelling counter-narrative, intensifying the already fierce information war and, consequently, the military conflict itself.

It is also important to denote the British government's role in Syria's media landscape, as it conducted a so-called "propaganda war against the Islamic State" and influenced the public view of the "moderate armed opposition" to Assad's regime (Cobian et al., 2016). However, this intervention inadvertently added to the complexity of understanding the Syrian conflict. The situation was further complicated by the evolving nature of insurgent groups, described as a "complex and shifting alliance of armed factions" (Cobian et al., 2016). Over time, many of these groups have shifted towards more extreme beliefs and actions (Cobian et al., 2016), thereby making the multi-layered conflict even harder to comprehend. The British intervention in Syria's media landscape, while aimed at countering Islamic State propaganda, inadvertently contributed to the radicalization of both the public perception and the actual nature of the armed opposition.

Untangling Misinformation

The “fog of war” in Syria has been perpetuated by a complex web of misinformation and propaganda. The efforts of the Assad regime, the UK, and Russia to construct narratives regarding the Syrian Civil War have been interconnected, despite their distinct political agendas. Each entity aims to shape information so as to further its interests: Syria seeks to maintain Assad's grip on power, the UK attempts to support moderate opposition groups, and

Russia works to consolidate its strategic foothold in the region while countering Western influence. The deliberate spread of misinformation perpetuates a cycle of confusion, impeding efforts towards clarity and accountability (Kousta, 2022). The distortion of truth not only prolongs the conflict but also extends its humanitarian repercussions (Kousta, 2022). Ending the Syrian Civil War necessitates untangling this web of misinformation—enabling the international community to comprehend the true nature of the conflict and work towards sustainable peace (Kousta, 2022). As long as false narratives and propaganda persist, feeding into international perceptions and policy decisions, the road to resolution remains obscured.

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