



***Syria in perspective. From externally aggravated crisis to national reconstruction***

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Ediciones Complutense, Madrid, 2020

Nº páginas 315

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/RiHC.2020.i15.17>

## SYRIA, A CONFLICT EXACERBATED BY PROPAGANDA

In this book Professor Pablo Sapag approaches to a decade long Syrian crisis not yet completely solved. Along its 315 pages the author offers a wide range of clues to understand what has happened in Syria since March 2011, when in the midst of the so-called “Arab spring” the Syrian crisis erupted following similar events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Among those answers outstands the intensive use of propaganda by all the parties involved in the crisis. Sapag frames that essential element of his book from a historical perspective which facilitates the theoretical understanding of the use and abuse of propaganda and how it has been channelled both through old and new media.

Published in English by Ediciones Complutense University Press this completely updated and adapted version of the previous Spanish editions (2017, 2019), reveals the propaganda strategies and tactics exploited by different agencies along the years of the Syrian crisis. Both the opposition –from Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to some groups of Kurds- and the Syrian Government communication efforts are detailed and compared, as are the ones of the jihadi organizations also involved in the Syrian conflict, from the more local Jabhat al-Nusra / Jabhat Fatah al Sham to the globalized Islamic State, a terrorist group formerly known as DAESH-ISIS. Sapag explains the propaganda logic behind that name changing pattern but also how the ideological differences between the ruling Ba'ath party and the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP) have been expressed through their respective messages.

Regarding both the regional and global powers involved in the crisis, from Qatar to Iran and from the US to Russia, the author exposes the close relationship of these actors' propaganda strategies and the mainstream media they directly or indirectly control. Thus, and in some cases with more detail than in others and always in the frame of the Syrian crisis, the book briefly introduces the history and evolution of some media outlets like Al Jazeera, Al Majadeen or even the Latin American broadcaster Telesur.

Beside old media, like television networks, social media played an outstanding, however irregular, part in the fierce propaganda war around the Syrian crisis. As the book exposes, new media were very effective to disseminate messages outside Syria but much less inside a country with a very limited Internet penetration when the crisis started a decade ago. In this context, the book interestingly exposes the limits of cyber slacktivism agitation in crisis such as the one in Syria.

Regarding the messages and the narrative deployed by the different actors involved in the crisis, Sapag not just dissections them but presents the historical, political and social context of those very messages thus revealing the logic behind them. In that sense, the author devotes important sections of his book to explain the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Syrian society. The latter is a crucial element to understand both, the different propaganda strategies of those local parties involved in the crisis and the partial outcome of it, with a Syrian Government retaking control of most of its territory. As history of any mass communication process shows, the relation between religion and propaganda has indeed been very prolific. In this regard, the author's mentions to several conflicts happening at the end of the previous century, such as Kosovo and East Timor, and its connections with the Syrian one offers a perspective of the evolution of persuasive communication management in the era of what Mary Kaldor defines as 'new wars' and other authors as 'hybrid warfare', situations in which propaganda plays a key role in setting any military and political strategy.

Sapag's historical perspective is accompanied by an effort to offer current information up to the publishing date. That's why the book conditions Syria's physical and political

reconstruction to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the new wave of economic sanctions recently imposed to the Syrian Government by the US and the EU. Those extra and current facts are always introduced and supported by an impressive bibliographical review of texts in English, Spanish, French and Arabic plus the statements and testimonies of on the ground actors of the Syrian crisis, from combatants to NGOs personnel and the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who was interviewed by Pablo Sapag in Damascus during the field research for this book.

All in all, a scholar contribution that pretends to fill the void of rigorous books devoted to a multi-faceted conflict approached from the point of view of History of Propaganda, undoubted a scientific discipline which as this book demonstrates is useful to untangle those intertwined aspects –from international relations to economic ambitions - of what up to now is the gravest conflict of the 21st century.