DAZED AND CONFUSED: RUSSIAN "INFORMATION WARFARE" AND THE MIDDLE EAST – THE SYRIA LESSONS

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On 7th April 2018, a chemical attack in the Syrian city of Douma, on the periphery of Damascus, reportedly killed at least 70 people. The attack sparked indignation from the international community and caused American, French and British air strikes a week later, as it was attributed to the Syrian Army by these countries and non-governmental workers in Syria.

But these attacks also led to a full-scale Russian informational strategy aimed at confusing Western public opinion and dividing their leaders so as to sow doubt on what actually happened on the ground. The stories broadcast on TV and disseminated through social media ranged from outright denial (claims that there were no chemical attacks, no patients in hospitals, and that photos and testimonies were fake) to conspiracy theories (that this was a scheme by the White Helmets or Westerners to divert attention from the Skripal affair), to defending the regime (by arguing that "everyone knows" that Syria does not have chemical weapons) and finally comparisons with Nazi propaganda methods.

This example – among many others – has confirmed Russia's uninhibited approach when it comes to asserting its own narrative on key strategic matters. "Information warfare" has been conceived of by the Russian leadership as a particularly potent instrument to achieve its foreign policy objectives. So far, outside Europe and the United States (US), Moscow's use of information operations has been scarcely analysed. This policy brief seeks to discuss Russian objectives in the Middle East in resorting to a wide range of tried and tested tools of influence while embracing the potentialities of networked technologies. It will examine the different narratives pushed by Russia and the consequences of these informational battles for the Syrian conflict. Finally, it will assess the Russian policy and

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provide a few policy recommendations so that the European Union (EU) addresses that challenge.

"Information Warfare" as a Key Tool in Russia's Foreign Policy

In the Russian construct, information warfare is not an activity limited to wartime. It is not even restricted to the "initial phase of conflict" before hostilities begin, which includes information preparation of the battle space (Antonovich, 2011). Instead, it is an ongoing activity of the state of relations with the opponent (Heickerö, 2010); "in contrast to other forms and methods of opposition, information confrontation is waged constantly in peacetime" (Panarin, 2012).

At the same time, Russians have drawn a distinction between the nature of information confrontation in peacetime and wartime. According to this categorisation, peacetime is mostly characterised by covert measures, reconnaissance, espionage, building capacities and degrading those of the adversary, and manoeuvring for advantage in the information space. Wartime measures, by contrast, are deliberately aggressive, and include "discrediting [adversary] leadership, intimidating military personnel and civilians… falsification of events, disinformation, and hacking attacks" (Sharavov, 2000; Malyshev, 2000). Furthermore, "the main effort is concentrated on achieving political or diplomatic ends, and influencing the leadership and public opinion of foreign states, as well as international and regional organisations" (Donskoy & Nikitin, 2005). If measured by these criteria, recent Russian activities in the information domain would indicate that Russia already considers itself to be in a state of war.

Crucially, information warfare can cover a vast range of different activities and processes seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort or destroy information. The channels and methods available for doing this cover an equally broad range, including computers, smartphones, real or invented news media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, vox pops by concerned citizens, YouTube videos, or direct approaches to individual human targets.

Russian information warfare revolves around several vehicles all of which originate from previously tried and tested Soviet tactics: creating a "permissive environment" that allows Moscow to disseminate its message; "reflexive control" where the enemy is driven to make favourable decisions to Moscow; and, subversion and destabilisation, which weaken both governments and military authorities, and benefit Moscow in accordance with its zero sum game rationale.

The Middle East: Another Playground for Russian Information Warfare

Russia's policy in the Middle East is wider than the… Middle East itself: it also importantly deals with the West, most notably the US. Since 2012 and Vladimir Putin's return to the

Kremlin, Russia's policy in that region has been part of a wider strategy aimed at creating an international order that would shield Russia against Western interference in its internal affairs and would guarantee it an equal footing with the US. In practice, it means that Russia's Middle Eastern policy is subordinated to the Kremlin's global strategy towards Washington. In the Middle East, Moscow seeks to create a regional variant of what it believes to be the best model of the international order, i.e. a concert of powers that would include, along with Russia, the regional powers of Turkey and Iran, as well as the US, provided the latter shows a willingness to cooperate with Russia on an equal footing and give up its "hegemonic habits" (Gvosdev, 2017).

The Middle East, especially since Moscow decided to intervene militarily in Syria in September 2015, is of crucial importance to assert Russia's national power and international status. More fundamentally, since the world financial crisis and the war in Georgia in 2008, Russia is persuaded of an ineluctable decline of the US. Moscow considers international rules have not changed with the end of the Cold War, and that international relations should remain shaped by domination and conflict. Russia openly contests their narrative over global politics, which would no longer match with the actual balance of power (Lo, 2015).

While the post-Soviet space, Europe and the US are the areas where the main examples of information manipulation are taking place, other areas of concern are emerging, including the Middle East. The vulnerability of the region's populations to information manipulation attacks is heightened by several factors, the main being the presence of conflicts and authoritarian rulers, and the absence of sufficient trustworthy and credible information.

Russian information operations are expanding in the Middle East – the case of Syria being the most prominent and illustrative of Russia's ambitions to counter Western narratives.

Syria: Narratives and Methods

Russia intervened militarily in Syria to respond to a series of connected objectives. Specifically, the Syrian campaign aimed at defending and saving an embattled ally and securing Russian military-political assets in Syria; preventing a replication of a "Libya-like" regime change scenario; inflicting a preventive strike on Jihadists, thousands of whom allegedly originate from the post-Soviet space; diverting attention away from Ukraine, where Russia has continued to bleed soldiers, and breaking the international isolation; enhancing its regional profile; positioning itself domestically and globally as a rising great power and indispensable international actor, claiming a status on par with the US.

Related to these stated goals, Russian information policy in the Middle East combines a threefold dimension: domestic, regional and global. On Syria, in particular, Russian

state media reports have a twofold objective: domestically, it is about legitimating the Kremlin's Syrian policy in order to prevent any potential disagreement or contest. The defensive nature of Russian information warfare has often been obscured, despite the fact that all national doctrines explicitly prioritise the "protection of the national informational space" against any hypothetical external threats (Nocetti, 2015). Internationally, Russia's goal is to impose a Russian narrative over Middle Eastern geopolitics, and act as an alternative to the West. The examples of the TV channels Rossiya 24 and, more importantly, Russia Today (rebranded RT in 2009), via its Arabic version Rusia Al-Yaum (rebranded RT Arabic), suggest an "alternative" vision to the Syrian conflict, in the committed objective of shaping a Russian perspective on international politics and countering the dominant narratives of Western media (Yablokov, 2015). The regional dimension appears subordinated to these domestic and global priorities: Moscow's regional initiatives primarily serve wider goals, such as reformatting the post-Cold War international order (Trenin, 2018) and putting an end to value-led Western military interventions, namely under the guise of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (Averre & Davies, 2015).

The Narrative Transcends Facts

After having watched over 40 hours of RT/RT Arabic and Vesti reports and programmes between September 2015 and March 2016 – the first phase of Russia's military intervention –, the author can make the following remarks. On Syria, the reports of these two media outlets erase any distinction between truth and lie, suggesting that different narratives are as much "points of view" that have the same value. In most cases, they express without any nuance the opinion of the Russian government: the war is comprehended through the sole lens of the Syrian regime's counter-insurrection against a "radical" opposition largely made of "terrorists", financed and equipped from the outside to ignite a regime change. The Syrian military is showcased as a stabilising, patriotic and disciplined force; whilst rebels are assimilated either to radical Islamists or to mercenaries who hide their actual motives by democratic claims in order to dupe alleged credulous Western public opinion. Numerous TV and online reports also take up the idea of a "secular" Syria – i.e. a bulwark against Jihadism, with continual references to the multi-religious character of Syrian society, for instance through showing Muslim soldiers praying in churches or Christian troops defending mosques against rebels' assaults. This approach also fits into a correlated component of Russia's foreign policy, globally and in the Middle East, exploiting the alleged Christianophobia of the West by updating a 19th century fight among powers to "protect" Eastern Christians in the Levant.

An emotional register is usually favoured, which consequentially depoliticises reports by focusing on the suffering of civilians in the hands of "terrorists". Overall, the absence of clear ideological principles is compensated by an unequivocal anti-Americanism

(Yablokov, 2015) – the final goal of such media being less to give a positive image of Russia than to discredit the US' (Rawnsley, 2015). In other words, Russian information strategy – and that of RT in particular – is not so much about presenting its own facts as casting doubt on everyone else's. These media outlets, finally, give a big place to conspiracy theories (e.g. involvement of the CIA or the Mossad, dissemination of rumours, etc.) that, in the Arab world, find a real echo in all levels of society (Gray, 2010).

Targeting the Syrian Opposition – i.e. "Assad or Daesh"

More specifically, the Russian official discourse has sought to combat the loose coalition of Syrian opposition groups. This is because they deny the labelling of the Russian intervention as legitimate peacekeeping, structure themselves from outside Syria (Turkey, France, etc.), get most of their funding from conservative Gulf monarchies whose Syrian agenda is fundamentally opposed to Russia's, and above all because they seek to topple Bashar al-Assad. That echoes a fundamental feature of Russia's conception of international relations and law: the only legitimate actors are governments; any actions seeking to disrupt and change organised states are seen as illegal. The institutional and conservative nature of Russian thinking has been a permanent feature of Moscow's policy on Syria.

When military success opened an opportunity for greater diplomatic engagement, the Kremlin sought to create a dichotomy among the anti-Assad opposition: the armed groups could either honour the ceasefire and gravitate towards a political process through the Russian reconciliation centres set up by the Russian Ministry of Defence, or violate the ceasefire, receive the qualification of "terrorists", regardless of their actual worldview and political affiliation, and find themselves immediately under unsparing attack, defined by Russia as "counter-terrorism" activities. On the latter dimension, useful parallels can be made between Russian discourse and influence operations on Syria and Moscow's narrative on Chechnya (Notte, 2016).

In other words, Russia pushed the idea that in Syria the only two options were Bashar al-Assad or the Jihadists, without any other possible alternative emanating from civil society. This narrative, endlessly hammered through RT and social media, has had major local consequences, since it effectively discredited the Syrian opposition, as well as reducing the complexities of the Syrian conflict to a binary choice between the Assad regime and a takeover by Salafist Jihadists. The outcomes for Russia have also been global: Russian information campaigns resulted in fading Western public support for Assad's departure at a time when refugees were fleeing massively to Europe. A seemingly local objective – preventing the Assad regime from being toppled– then translated into much broader gains for Moscow, since the reversal of Western public opinions towards Syria broke Russia's international isolation after it annexed Crimea and started to wage a war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Blaming the West

It therefore comes as no surprise that the US and Europe were another target of Russian information operations. Here, Russian strategy does not only deal with exposing the flaws of Western strategy in Syria – it is about blaming the West either of having failed to curb terrorism in the Middle East or of having created Daesh and covertly cooperating with them for malign purposes in the region. These narratives echo the perceptions that both popular Middle Eastern and Russian audiences tend to have, and are probably designed mainly for their consumption.

The notion that Islamism is a phenomenon created by Western countries is spun around the "original sin" of American support for the Taliban during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989). This notion efficiently fits with the view that since it was the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that paved the way for the emergence of Daesh, Vladimir Putin even claimed it was the US that created Daesh (letting it be understood that they undertook this purposefully).

Blaming Westerners also allowed the Kremlin to deny accusations of war crimes committed by its air forces and the Syrian military. On 21st August 2013, a chemical attack in Ghouta killed over 1,400 civilians. Within hours, the tone was set with the attack dismissed as "Saudi war propaganda". In the following days, Russian coverage veered between blaming Saudi Arabia, Britain, Turkey and Israel, to insisting that the "alleged chemical attack… had been fabricated" and the footage "is fraud." RT responded with similar alacrity to the long and deadly siege and bombing of Eastern Aleppo in 2016.

Likewise, since 2013 the White Helmets, a Syrian humanitarian organisation operating in opposition-held areas to save civilians, has been the target of a massive, systematic and coordinated information manipulation campaign. This campaign has continued to spread two main messages over the past six years: on the one hand, that the organisation works closely with the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda (al-Nusra and affiliates) and could, therefore, be described as a terrorist organisation. On the other, the organisation is alleged to be responsible for several "false flags", whose purpose was to incriminate Damascus and provoke Western strikes. These accusations have been made at least five times against the White Helmets since 2013.

Such accusations discredit information from the ground regarding the humanitarian situation and the shelling and abuses carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies. Ultimately, any initiative to counter impunity in Syria can be invalidated if it is based on the testimony of the White Helmets. That narrative also accuses the White Helmets of staging fake chemical attacks and generates uncertainty about the responsibility of the Syrian regime for such attacks. That was the case in the wake of the chemical attack at

Khan Shaykhun on 4th April 2017. Russia and its Syrian ally have sought to discredit all forms of opposition or action against impunity for the war crimes committed in Syria – in other words, neutralise the White Helmets because they are potential witnesses to war crimes (De Giovanni, 2018).

"War is Over"?

On 11th December 2017, Vladimir Putin made a brief halt at Hmeimim Russian military base, before a trip to Egypt and Turkey. Bashar al-Assad, overly assiduous next to the Russian President, seemed like a vassal. The latter expressed his delight for the success of his military in the fight against terrorism, and announced the withdrawal of a significant part of the Russian expeditionary force. However, the Russian troops remained on the Syrian ground; they played a crucial coordination and support role during the offensive launched by the Syrian regime to seize Eastern Ghouta from the rebels between February and April 2018.

This episode was interesting for two main reasons. Firstly, it was about the withdrawal of the Russian military. The term "withdrawal" was announced several times during the operation and should be seen as a component of Russian information warfare. The periodical victory declarations essentially changed neither Moscow's strategy nor its operations. They simply downgraded Moscow's risks, enabled the domestic media to promote a triumphant "mission accomplished" narrative, expanded the Kremlin's manoeuvring space, created optimal conditions for whatever comes next, and refuted Western claims that it would get hindered in the Syrian quagmire – in a reiteration of the Afghanistan morass in the 1980s.

Secondly, since that episode a new line of narration emerged: the war would be over, as Daesh forces would be cornered in a handful of places in Syria and Iraq, and as Bashar al-Assad's departure is no longer demanded by the US and the Europeans. That narrative serves the Kremlin's twofold objective: recapturing the whole pre-war Syrian territory, which is shared with Iran, and mastering the post-conflict political process. From 2018 onwards, the narrative that "the war in Syria is now over" has been disseminated through consequential RT online programmes and its affiliated social media accounts, most notably on Twitter. This not only concerns RT Arabic: as the message is significantly aimed at the West, the narrative has been spread via the English-speaking version of the channel and, as the author observed, the recently-born version of RT France. Regionally, the narrative serves the purpose of setting Russia as the key forward-looking power broker in the Middle East, which until now has managed to avoid being trapped in serious political contradictions in the region.

Assessment and Policy Recommendations

Assessing the successes and failures of Russian information manipulation is no easy assignment. Syria is a prominent case study of Russia's information warfare tactics, which are anything but new but have been considerably "modernised" via networked

technologies. Seemingly, the Kremlin obtained several gains: the *pax americana* in the Middle East has been weakened; Western moral-based military interventions are no longer exported to the region; Western policies have been delegitimised, etc.

Through blatant exaggerations and distortions of facts, production of false reports – being rebroadcast in different formats on different sites loyal to Russian policy –, amplification of genuine uncertainty, use of multiple contradictory narratives, and creation of opportunistic fabrications, the Russian leadership has deployed a multifaceted information warfare that undeniably weighed in on the outcome of the Syrian war while negating the root causes of the conflict.

However, it should be emphasised that Russian policy in the region is mostly reactive and opportunistic in nature, and benefited greatly from the relative US policy vacuum – starting from Barack Obama's procrastination on Syria to Donald Trump's seeming indifference towards the war and announced US withdrawal from north-eastern Syria in December 2018.

Regionally, Russian efforts seemed to have paid off, even though Russia's "return to the Middle East" has been mostly based on the credibility of its hard power rather than the attractiveness of the country. Nevertheless, Arab perceptions of Russia's regional role have improved – as shown by recent international polls conducted in Middle Eastern countries. In 2017 and 2018 Russia thus appeared to the Arab youth as the first external ally to the region, before the US (Arab Youth Survey, 2017 and 2018). Another limit appears for Russia: unlike Western countries, where traditional media and the internet are free of censorship, Middle Eastern governments generally tightly control the information landscape, which prevents Russian messaging from being more largely and effectively disseminated.

Overall, plausibility and consistency are no preoccupation for Moscow: striking public opinions and sowing doubt are sufficient to weaken Western immune defences. Counter-campaigns that show evidence and denounce Russian disinformation and propaganda without taking measures are thus doomed to failure. However, the following comments and recommendations might be provided:

- On a "macro" level, the EU should find a way not to suffer from the deterioration of the transatlantic relation in its dealings with Middle Eastern geopolitics – including the Syrian question. Brussels should keep in mind that Moscow precisely seeks to exploit the sharply increased transatlantic disunity. In the Middle East, this has translated into the manipulation of the refugee crisis and the terrorist issue.
- The EU should more vehemently expose Moscow's complete and sincere disregard of the humanitarian consequences of its actions in Syria. This is unlikely to change the

course of the conflict but would perhaps "tell" Middle Eastern audiences that Russian "counter-terrorist" methods are different from those of Western countries.

- The EU should comprehend the global picture of the Russian threat, notably by studying the ties between "trolls", media and governmental agencies, and the operational modes between them. In the Middle East, the media ecosystem behind Russian information warfare involves Iranian, Russian and pro-Assad media and social media accounts. Other regions, notably Latin America through TeleSur and anti-imperialist networks, echo this disinformation. The strategic alliance between these various actors in Syria doubles as a united and coordinated front on social media.
- European media should be prudent and careful in disseminating Russian disinformation. If initiatives in this regard have mushroomed in the past three years, they mostly originate from EU member states that have poor relations with Russia or do not have significant interests in the Middle East. The in-depth, balanced assessment of Russian information manipulation in the region – with a focus on Syria – should go beyond the traditional diversity of views on Russia within the EU.

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