

The coverage of the US-led war on IS in Syria by RT-Arabic

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Abstract

The war against the Islamic State organization (IS) in Syria erupted in a tense political environment, where Russia and the US have been rivals, but, at the same time, they fought against their common global enemy, IS. So, this study aimed to explore how RT-Arabic represented the US-led intervention against IS in Syria, in the light of the Kremlin's policies as well as basic principles of professionalism. The study covered one year (from 1 October 2015 to 30 September 2016). It relied on a sample of 240 news reports. It used Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis to examine the representation of the US-led war policy, the military actions and the humanitarian aspect of this conflict. The study found that RT Arabic reflected the policies of its government as it emphasized the ineffectiveness of the US war policy. The military actions, led by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were represented positively. However, the anti-IS operations, which were conducted by the Syrian opposition factions were contextualized in terms of the common interests between these factions and Turkey in the North of Syria.

Keywords: IS, Syria, US-led intervention, SDF, RT

Introduction

In 2014, the so-called Abu Baker Al Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Islamic State organization (IS). This transnational armed organization included

fighters from different countries. It was known for its violent actions, mass killings and abductions, which targeted Arab and Western people. In response to IS threat, the then-US President Barack Obama declared his will to destroy IS, as he said: “I have made it clear that we will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are. That means I will not hesitate to take action against IS in Syria, as well as Iraq” but this intervention "will not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil" (Obama, 2014).

The US led an international coalition to fight against IS in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian regime and Russia were excluded from this coalition since they were blamed for killing the Syrian people in the context of the internal Syrian conflict. So, political divisions over Syria’s internal crisis influenced the fighting against IS.

The Kremlin has not supported the US-led coalition airstrikes against IS in the Syrian territories and considered this intervention as an act of aggression because it was conducted without the permission of Al Assad. For Putin, IS should be fought in terms of a broad coalition and in cooperation with Al Assad regime (O'Connor, 2016).

This conflict was more apparent in media communication. For politicians, mass media are considered as a central space of global politics where they try to promote their policies advance their own interests. So, governments created media outlets to deliver their preferred messages to the world. Gamson, et al. (1992) argue that news media provide us with “the lens through which we construct meaning about political

and social issues. This lens is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it” (p.374).

In Syria, which is the focus of this study, the war on international terrorism is distinctive in that both the US and Russia sought to destroy IS but they adopted different policies and conflicting agendas. In this situation, news media organizations can play a crucial role in shaping the meaning of the war on IS. Against this backdrop, this study is meant to explore how Russia Today-Arabic (RT) represented the US-led intervention against IS in Syria..

Problem Statement

The war against IS erupted in a tense political environment, where Russia and the US have been rivals, but, at the same time, they have fought against their common global enemy, IS. So, this study will examine how RT-Arabic represented the US-led intervention against IS organization, in the light of the Kremlin’s policies as well as basic principles of professionalism. In the context of information war, RT- Arabic should compete with Arab news media outlets to communicate the Russian voice to the Arab world.

Question of Study

How did RT Arabic represent the US-led military intervention against IS in Syria, to Arab-speaking audiences, in the context of the Kremlin’s policies?

To answer to this overarching question, the study addresses the following sub-questions:

- 1- How did RT-Arabic represent the US-led war policy?
- 2- How did RT-Arabic depict the US-led military actions?
- 3- How did RT-Arabic represent the humanitarian aspect of this conflict?

Aims of Study

- 1- To explore how RT-Arabic portrayed the US-led war against IS in Syria
- 2- To explore how RT-Arabic represented the US-led war policy
- 3- To examine how RT-Arabic depicted the US-led military actions
- 4- To explore how the RT-Arabic depicted the humanitarian aspect of this conflict

Significant of study

RT-Arabic is based in Moscow and financed by Russia, a significant rival to the US in the Middle East. The study shows the interactions between media and politics, particularly in wartime and how such interactions lead the media to construct a complex discourse to respond to the circumstances around them. Furthermore, the study contributes to understanding the role of the media in serving their countries and shaping Arab public opinion.

Literature review

In 2005, Russia created Russia Today (RT) as a tool of Russia's media diplomacy. Its goal is to promote positive image about Russia abroad in terms of politics, culture, and language study, "in close cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church, which in itself has come to serve as a tool of Russian soft power" (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016). Critics consider that RT was initiated mainly, by Russia, to compete with the

BBC, CNN and other key international news media outlets for Russia seeks to break the monopoly of Western news outlets in the global media market. (Yablokov, 2015).

Previous studies related to RT

- Dajani, Gillespie, Crilley (2021) "Differentiated visibilities: RT Arabic's narration of Russia's role in the Syrian war"

This article focuses on the social media content of RT Arabic. It applied a qualitative analysis of social media posts in order to evaluate whether and how RT Arabic built a strategic narrative of Russia's involvement in the war in Syria. The results of the study showed that while Russia's military presence was ignored, its political and diplomatic roles were highly visible. Syria was depicted as a dysfunctional state and vulnerable to foreign interventions. In RT's portrayal of the conflict, Russia was shown as coming to help the Syrians.

- Al Ibrahim and Shi (2020) "Framing terrorism: A comparative content analysis of ISIS news on RT Arabic and Sky News Arabia websites"

This study compared RT Arabic and Sky News Arabia's framing of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria actions from 1 June 2014 until 30 June 2016. It applied quantitative content analysis of the news articles. The study found that RT and Sky News shared some features in framing IS. Both websites adopted the conflict frame in presenting IS. Threat is the dominant discourse about IS in the coverage of the two websites.

- Crilley & Chatterje-Doody (2020) "Emotions and war on YouTube: Affective investments in RT's visual narratives of the conflict in Syria"

This study combines discourse analysis of RT 'breaking news' YouTube videos of Russian military action in Syria with analysis of 750 comments and social media interactions on those videos. The findings showed that RT gave moral and legal justifications for Russian intervention in multiple audio-visual items, within a visual narrative of the conflict that adopted affective representations of key actors/events. Viewers were influenced by the content and expressed opinions and feelings coherent with RT's representation of the conflict.

- Metzger & Siegel (2019) "When state-sponsored media goes viral: Russia's use of RT to shape global discourse on Syria"

The study focused on Russia's use of RT on Twitter at the time of the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015. It analyzed a dataset of over 21.8 million English and 11.3 million Arabic tweets collected between August 2015 and November 2015. The study showed that RT was successful on Twitter. First, RT channel was the most shared news source about the situation in Syria. moreover, RT's tweets circulated narratives that supported the Russian in Syria.

- Swolfs (2018) "The same fight, a different story: A comparative media framing analysis of the Battle of Raqqa in the online coverage of CNN and RT"

This study examines how the CNN and RT- English framed the Battle of Raqqa. It applied Semetko & Valkenburg's (2000) frame taxonomy. The study showed that CNN framed the US-led role, focusing on the conflict frame while RT focused on the humanitarian aspect of the war.

Methodology

The study applies a qualitative research method. I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine news texts, with focus on the representation of the war policy, the military actions and the humanitarian aspect of the US-led intervention. To do this, I followed Fairclough's (2003) approach to critical discourse analysis. He stressed the role language in creating reality, knowledge, ideology, and power. According to him, the analysis of a text should cover the description of linguistic elements, the interpretation, and explanation of the relationship between the text and social context. For the purpose of study I focused on the intertextuality and the social actors. According to Fairclough, intertextuality provides a useful analytical resource, particularly in news texts for the genre of the press depends on the distribution of information between the authorial voice and attributed voices. He proposes that analyzing the intertextuality of a text allows to examine how the authors (e.g. reporters in news media organizations) incorporate the voices and the claims of others into their text. For Fairclough (2003), intertextuality is a matter of re-

contextualization, a process through which reporters texture different voices in a particular context to communicate a particular idea. When a voice “is incorporated into a text, there are always choices about how to ‘frame’ it, how to contextualize it, in terms of other parts of the text” (p. 53). Examining the intertextuality in news texts has something to do with how the sources are represented: whether they are quoted or constructed through nominalization or metonymy and whether the information is attributed to identified sources or non-identified ones. In addition to intertextuality, in analyzing news as discourse, I examined the features which characterized the news texts in terms of semantic and lexical choices and how these elements were articulated to represent the US war policy. The analysis also covered the semantic and linguistic features which characterized the representation of the military actors/actions and how they were selectively structured to create particular patterns and communicate value judgments about the US-led intervention. Furthermore, I examined how the RT represented the humanitarian aspect, so I looked at the linguistic elements of the news reports, and I examined the political/moral implications that could be read through these patterns.

Samples of the Study

This study examines news reports collected from RT-Arabic’s YouTube channel, tracking a one-year period, between 1 October 2015 and 30 September 2016. It relies on a sample of 240 news reports in total.

Data Collection

Regarding data collection from RT-Arabic, news reports about the war on IS in Syria were found in a playlist dedicated to news about Syria. After I downloaded the list, which was composed of 1000 reports, I surveyed the news reports and selected the ones related the US-led intervention in Syria, whose length was at least 1:30 minutes. As a result, 460 reports were collected. Then, these reports were listed and put into order according to their dates, and 20 reports were selected per month. 20 reports per month were expected to cover most of the events that occurred in that month. These comprised the first 20 reports which appeared on the list each month throughout the period of study. Thus, 240 reports in total were selected as a sample.

Analysis and discussion

Before I proceed with the analysis, I draw attention that RT-Arabic uses the term “Daesh” to refer to IS.

The representation of the US-led war policy:

The analysis of this aspect examines how RT has covered local and international responses towards the White House’s counterterrorism policy on IS. So, it shows how US official voices are textured in relation to other local or international voices, and in relation to RT journalists’ voices in the reports and what messages are communicated through these voices. This leads to exploring how RT coverage is influenced by Russia’s policies.

Based on the sample studied, RT emphasized the ineffectiveness of the US counterterrorism policy on IS and the need for a global strategy to face international terrorism.

RT incorporated voices from the White House, such as the US President Obama, the Secretary of State Kerry, and the Secretary of Defense Carter. The statements made by these officials were followed by local critical voices (the Republicans or US political experts) or by international voices raising the need for a more effective strategy. Then, a typical strategy is to interview or quote specific critical voices alongside spokespeople for the Obama Administration. The critical responses are at the same time further emphasized through the reporters' explanatory comments, as shown in the examples below.

RT's journalist Rima Abu Hamdiya reported the US Secretary of Defense Carter as saying: "I have met with representatives of 40 countries that have participated in the US-led international coalition fighting ISIL, and I have asked them to increase their contributions. This includes military equipment such as strike fighters and scouting jets, in addition to training services." Then, the journalist commented: "Carter's statements have not led to tamping down *internal criticism* of the war policy." Senator John McCain was shown, saying:

"The threat is growing fast. The weakness of our Administration's strategy can be attributed to two reasons: first, we thought that time was on our side, but it was not. And it is still not on our side, particularly after the attacks that happened in Sinai, Paris and San Bernardino. Second, we thought we should not deploy ground combat forces."

Then RT's journalist said: "Although the US-led coalition has conducted thousands of airstrikes against Daesh's positions, the US Secretary of Defense has admitted that

Daesh threat has not been contained yet. This admission will provoke *new criticisms* regarding the US counterterrorism strategy.” (RT, 12 October 2015). So, in the above text as well as in the next two examples, the claims made by the White House officials were followed by critical messages that refer to the failure of the US to contain IS threat. In her comments, RT’s reporter emphasized the critical views which were expressed by the reported sources. This ordering of voices is noticed in all reports that tackle the US policy on IS.

In another report, RT quoted Obama as saying: “So far more than 8000 airstrikes have been conducted against Daesh positions. These strikes in addition to the operations conducted by our partners on the ground have resulted in killing key figures in Daesh organization and recapturing lands in Iraq and Syria.” RT’s reporter then commented: “Obama has stressed that he will pursue his counterterrorism strategy which has not led to driving Daesh back yet.” An American political expert was shown saying: “Some observers raise questions about alternative plans if this strategy failed. Should we change it? Should we send ground troops? But this requires more efforts. I am not sure if the President or the US military know what should be done.” The reporter concluded: “It is noticeable that Washington stands on the edge of the war on terror. It is *not decisive enough* in fighting terrorism, and it does not leave this question to other actors that can eliminate such a threat” (RT, 26 October 2015).

Similarly, RT quoted the director of the CIA, John Brennan, as saying: “The coalition managed to destroy Daesh’s financial resources, but unfortunately despite all our efforts, we have not undermined the organization’s capacity yet.” Then the reporter,

Abu Hamdiya, commented: “Brennan’s statement is a straightforward admission that the coalition *has failed* to stop Daesh from launching terrorist attacks.” In the report, a political expert commented: “This is a clear admission that the US has not succeeded in defeating terrorism.” Then, the reporter questioned: “How can this organization, which has started to change its tactics, be defeated if the US coalition continues to pursue its current strategy?” (RT, 17 June 2016).

It is noticeable that RT reporter made negative lexical choices such as " failed", “not decisive enough”, "internal criticism" and “new criticisms.” So, RT news discourse raised concerns about the situation on the ground and brought to Arab viewers’ attention that things were going from bad to worse. Within RT context, this contextualization may lead to the inference that Russian intervention is needed.

In addition to quoting critical voices from the US, RT used non-identified sources [observers] to contextualize the US counterterrorism policy negatively, showing the representatives of the White House in a defensive stance.

For example, RT reported: “Carter said that the US would provide more support for the local forces fighting against the so-called Daesh in Syria. He stated that the US government might send more than 50 soldiers to Syria.” The voiceover commented:

The US Administration’s attempts to *defend* its strategy have provoked severe Congressional criticism as some senators have called for deploying thousands of ground troops while others called for supporting Syrian forces. Such *disagreements* between the US Administration and the Congress have affected the US-led counterterrorism efforts *negatively*, according to observers (RT, 2 December 2015).

In another report, Rima Abu Hamdiya quoted Obama as saying: “So far, 13,000 US-led airstrikes have been conducted in Iraq and Syria. Daesh has lost many of its leaders; we have killed more than 120 fighters. Our message is clear: if you target the United States and its allies, you will be held accountable.” Then, the reporter commented: “Observers read Obama’s statements as an attempt to *defend* his counterterrorism strategy, which has not led to degrading Daesh so far” (RT, 15 June 2016). In these two examples and the next one, RT journalists used the verb (to *defend*) to depict the US Administration’s position. RT relied on non-identified sources. Collective labels (observers/ experts) which refer to non-identified news sources are used in news texts to imply the truthfulness of the reported information; this strategy helps journalists background their voices and report news without having to provide precise sources or claims (Publitz and Bednarek,2009).

Furthermore, RT used the same reporting strategy to raise the need for global unity to encounter international terrorism as shown in the following texts:

Rima Abu Hamdiya reported: “Kerry mentioned the US-led military campaign would continue to prevent oil smuggling from IS territories. According to observers, this step is not enough as there is a need for a global strategy to destroy terrorist groups.”

Then the reporter commented: “Daesh has increased its attacks in Iraq, Syria and Europe, so *united efforts* are required to face the growing threat of transnational terrorist movements” (RT, 19 November 2015). Similarly, RT quoted Brett McGurk, the US Special Envoy for the international coalition as saying: “Daesh has lost territories in Iraq and Syria. Therefore, the organization will try to inspire lone wolves

to carry out attacks. And this danger will continue for a long time.” The report added: “According to experts, such challenges cannot be faced *without a consensus counterterrorism strategy*” (RT, 29 June 2016).

By using non-identified sources that raised the idea that IS, and the like, cannot be defeated without “*a consensus counterterrorism strategy*,” or “*united efforts*”. RT distances itself while it emphasizes Putin’s call for the formation of a global coalition against IS. One can say that by promoting the voices of US officials alongside non-identified sources, RT shows evidence of balanced coverage. However, this balance risks being false since it promotes competing voices as if they have equal weight (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004).

Moreover, RT adopted the same reporting style when communicating the US-led coalition members’ stance. It quoted specific US voices which were followed by critical voices that are not specifically identified [observers]. For example, RT covered a meeting which gathered the foreign ministers of more than 30 countries involved in the US-led coalition. The US Secretary, Kerry, was quoted as saying: “The coalition is resolved to defeat Daesh in Syria where the organization's capacity has been undermined, but its members are concentrating in Al Raqqa.” Then Carter was reported as saying: “The coalition campaign seeks to wipe out the cancer of Daesh in Syria as well as Iraq, since this organization threatens not only the Iraqis or the Syrians but also our citizens around the world.” RT's journalist Abu Hamdiya commented:

Observers say that this meeting has not realized new achievements, as there are *disagreements* among the members of the coalition on how to encounter terrorism. Also, observers estimate that the US strategy does not cope with the new tactics of Daesh that no longer seeks to control new territories in Iraq and Syria. Instead, it has started to carry out attacks in Europe (RT, 22 July 2016).

This reporting style involves vague criticisms. No member of the US-led coalition is named; also, no official source was quoted as expressing reservations on the US war strategy. So, this style does not show evidence of accurate reporting. RT reported "*disagreements*" among the coalition members without giving details.

RT used specific quotes, metonymy, as well as non-identified sources when contextualizing regional voices that call for more military involvement in Syria. The following texts included specific voices from the Gulf; these voices raised the need for more military actions against IS in Syria. This reporting style is more likely to gain audiences' trust, because of the greater specificity in attribution.

RT promoted the willingness of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to send ground forces to degrade IS in Syria. Abed El Hakim Alasmar reported: "The Saudi military advisor, Ahmed Assiri, has said that Riyadh is ready to send ground forces to fight against Daesh in Syria, provided the US coalition agrees." Then, the report added: "Some observers raise questions about the progress reportedly made by the US-led coalition against Daesh, in the light of the Saudi offer to deploy ground troops" (RT, 5 February 2016). Also, RT's journalist Ayham Alqadi reported: "The UAE will participate in any ground offensive to be launched in the future in Syria. According to

Emirati sources, the UAE will help the Syrian opposition forces recapture Al Raqqa, the main headquarter of Daesh.” The reporter interviewed a political analyst who considered the military manoeuvres, known as the ‘Thunder of the North’, that are led by Saudi Arabia, as a simulated military operation in Syria. The interviewee said: “The situation in Syria is unbearable.” The reporter commented: “Observers consider the huge manoeuvres organized by Saudi Arabia in cooperation with other counties, as serious preparations for a ground offensive in Syria” (RT, 15 February 2016). In addition to quoting specific voices from the Gulf, as well as non-specified sources, RT used metonymy, that is, “Saudi Arabia”, “Riyadh” and “the UAE.” The comments attributed to observers give the impression that the Gulf countries that participated in the US-led coalition were dissatisfied with the US war policy. Throughout, the sample, no voices were quoted as showing support for the US strategy.

Thus, it is possible to say that RT portrayed the political aspect of the US-led war in a way that consolidates the Russian policies toward Syria. The reports emphasized the shortcoming of the US counterterrorism policy. RT news discourse emphasized the need for global unity. The call for global efforts to respond to international terrorism creates the inference that the US Administration and its allies cannot eliminate Daesh by themselves. So, Russia and its allies should be partners of the US-led coalition in this war rather than being excluded.

The military aspect of the US-led intervention

This section discusses how RT has portrayed the US-led military campaign against IS.

The first point in this analysis is the framing of the military power of the US-led air campaign. RT coverage brought to viewers' attention the advanced military technology used by the US-led coalition but did not provide details about the type of machines deployed in Syria. This channel covered the US-led military actions from the perspective of the US and its ally, the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), allowing them to show their roles in the war against IS. This is to say RT did not use IS sources or incorporate opposing claims throughout the sample. RT journalists made positive lexical choices when contextualizing the military operations conducted by the US-backed SDF. The journalists used non-identified sources to distance themselves when representing the US-led intervention , as shown in the following examples:

RT's journalist Mohammed Hassan reported : “The US-led coalition warplanes are always in the skies over Ain Issa town. Equipped with *advanced weapons*, the US-backed SDF have driven Daesh fighters out of the town.” Then, a member of the SDF was interviewed; he said: “Daesh will be defeated in the coming days; we have received modern weapons from the US coalition, and now we can degrade Daesh.” The reporter continued: “In this military campaign, US special forces have supported the Kurdish-led SDF, in battles against Daesh. The US forces in Syria act in coordination with the coalition airmen to guide the Syrian ground troops, that advance towards Daesh positions.” Then, an American soldier was shown saying: “We provided the SDF with military equipment to enable them to fight on the front lines.”

Hassan commented: “According to experts, thanks to these *new military supplies*, which include *heavy weapons*, the SDF have become ready to attack Al Raqqa as well as other Daesh-held areas” (RT, 24 May 2016). In this text, the reporter used positive terms as he referred to the US military support for the SDF from the sky and on the ground. The military machines deployed in Syria were represented as "new", “heavy” and “advanced” and the US-led coalition warplanes were reported to have been “always in the skies” over Syria.

In another text, RT's journalist Khaled Kateb reported: “The US-led coalition warplanes have conducted precision bombings against Daesh targets in Manbij and its countryside. In the meantime, US soldiers have provided logistics support to the SDF and removed mines from the areas recaptured from Daesh.” Then a member of the SDF said in front of the camera: “We are now advancing towards Manbij.” The soldier pointed at the sky, saying: “These are the coalition’s strikes which target Daesh positions to pave the way for us.” Kateb commented: “Military experts say most of Daesh fighters have fled to Jarablus and Al Raqqa” (RT, 8 June 2016).

Besides, RT covered the US Commander General Joseph Votel’s visit to North Syria. The voiceover reported that his visit sought to deploy more Arab and Kurdish fighters in the context of the coalition’s preparations for a ground offensive to recapture Al Raqqa. Votel was quoted as saying: “I came to meet with leaders from the SDF. We discussed the situation in the battlefield. The movements of the enemy on the front lines affect our operations.” The voiceover added: “It has been reported that the US-led coalition warplanes have dropped warning leaflets, calling on civilian residents of

Al Raqqa to stay away from Daesh positions. Observers consider such acts as part of the warfare against Daesh” (RT, 22 May 2016). Like the previous one, this example shows the close cooperation between the US-led coalition and the SDF and draws attention that their actions have been conducted with due regard for the safety of civilians.

As shown above, RT represented the US forces in Syria as active agents, who removed mines, and provided logistics support for the SDF. Also, the US coalition was represented as a responsible agent that used precision bombs and so take actions to minimize or avoid collateral damage. No critical messages were promoted throughout the sample.

Similarly, a news report showing a member of the US special forces in Syria, read: “This American soldier is one of many foreign fighters who support the SDF in driving the terrorists out of Manbij.” Then the soldier was interviewed. He said: “I am proud to be one of the American soldiers who fight for freedom and democracy. The world should support the SDF in this war.” The RT's journalist Mohammed Hassan commented:

The US-led coalition warplanes are in the skies over Manbij, and heavy clashes are taking place in different areas in the city. Although Daesh fighters have placed mines in Al Assadiya neighborhood, the SDF managed to enter the positions which were recaptured from the organization, where they found records of oil, gas and agricultural products in addition to other funding sources (RT, 2 July 2016).

So, RT showed the positive role of the US forces as part of the US-led coalition against IS. Concerning journalistic practices, RT reported the anti-IS operations as if there was no other side and as if there were no opposing or critical views. It incorporated military sources as well as non-official sources, that evaluated the US-led actions positively.

What is true of the US-led forces is also true of the SDF. On the ground the SDF fighters were represented always as active agents who carried out attacks and recaptured lands from IS. RT reported:

“The SDF have gathered fighters from all provinces to face Daesh.” A fighter from the SDF was interviewed; he said: “We, Arab and Kurdish fighters, are here to defend Syria.” The voiceover commented: “The SDF’s members who managed to enter Manbij will participate in clearing the mines which Daesh left behind.” (RT, 10 June 2016). Similarly, RT reporter Khaled Kateb said: “After 10 days of heavy clashes, the military council of Manbij and SDF, backed by US-led strikes, stormed Manbij while Daesh fighters retreated to Al Raqqa, Maskana and Al Bab.” He added: “The SDF managed to cut IS supply route between Al Raqqa and Aleppo. They have taken control over Al Etihad University and a TV station” (RT, 2 August 2016).

Then, the SDF were represented as active agents that were reported to have recaptured strategic positions and cut off IS routes.

Furthermore, RT represented the SDF’s members who were killed in battles against IS fighters as heroes who sacrificed their lives to defend their country and protect civilians. A report, by Khaled Kateb, read: “In the battle for Manbij, the SDF have

lost several soldiers, *but they managed to liberate 250 000 civilians from Daesh*” (RT, 7 August 2016). Also, RT reported: “The SDF and Daesh have sustained huge losses in terms of fighters and materials. However, these forces *are resolved to pursue their military operations until they drive the terrorist organization out of Manbij and all territories that remain under its control.*” A soldier from the SDF was interviewed in the report. He said: “We will get rid of Daesh. We will follow them to Al Bab and Maskana. We will liberate Syria” (RT, 12 September 2016). In a third example, the voiceover reported: “The SDF have lost many soldiers *but took control over new areas such as the squares of Al Dalla and Saba Bahrat*” (RT, 4 July 2016).

So, the losses of the SDF were put in the context of their good intentions towards their people and their progress against IS on the ground. In the light of the examples mentioned above, RT's portrayal of the US-backed SDF activities seems to be unbalanced because it does not contextualize the news critically. According to basic principles of professional war reporting, journalists are required to report the conflicting sides fairly, which is not the case in RT coverage of the war on IS in Syria as noticed throughout the study sample.

In the portrayal of Daesh's military role, RT has focused on Daesh fighting tactics, particularly underground smuggling tunnels, mines, booby-trapped vehicles, and suicide bombers but the organization voice was not heard, as shown in the following examples:

RT's journalist Abed El Hakim Alasmar reported: “According to military experts, 1750 fighters from Daesh were deployed in the center of Manbij. Street fighting is

taking place; Daesh lined the streets of Manbij with snipers and mines.” A member of the SDF was quoted as saying: “The mines restrict our operations.” The journalist commented “The SDF have removed more than 6000 landmines so far” (RT, 8 June 2016). Another report read: “According to experts, more than 150 suicide bombers from Daesh are ready to carry out attacks against the SDF, using booby-trapped vehicles, in Manbij” (RT, 18 June 2016). Similarly, Mohammed Hassan reported:

Daesh has reportedly prepared its members for armed confrontations that may last for weeks. Daesh snipers, booby-trapped cars, and smuggling tunnels are obstacles which affect the SDF’s progress. According to experts, there are networks of tunnels leading from Manbij to Jarablus and Al Bab to convey military supplies to Daesh members (RT, 25 July 2016).

The reporter interviewed a soldier from the SDF who said: “We are advancing slowly since there are tunnels and mines; clashes are still taking place” (RT, 25 July 2016).

As shown above, RT showed Daesh’s resistance and various tactics. The SDF’s sources, non-identified sources in addition to the journalists’ comments were structured in a way that communicates the serious efforts of SDF and the difficult missions they lead on the front lines to defeat IS.

Another central point in this analysis is the portrayal of the anti-IS operations which were led by the Syrian opposition factions, with US-led coalition air support. In all the reports which covered these actions, the role of the Syrian opposition factions was contextualized in terms of shared interests between Turkey and these factions as they need to cooperate to prevent IS and the Kurdish-led forces, from progressing in north

Syria. In the reports, there was no reference to the US-led coalition warplanes although the coalition and Turkey provided air support for the opposition forces in their operations against IS. For example, RT's journalist Sami Lasmar reported:

Turkey has intensified its military deployment along the border with Syria, near Jarablus to fight Daesh. This operation which seeks to recapture the city appears to be a starting point for an offensive in which Ankara supports its allied Syrian opposition factions, according to official sources. Locals said that dozens of Turkish tanks and armored vehicles crossed the Syrian territories to support the Free Army, that managed to drive Daesh back. According to the Turkish defense minister, this operation has no time limit as Ankara will not allow the Kurdish forces to take control over the territories recaptured from Daesh (RT, 25 August 2016).

In the report, a political expert said: “The aim of this operation is not only to drive Daesh out of Jarablus but also to clear the area of all the terrorist organizations which threaten Turkey.” The voiceover commented: “Establishing an area, where neither Daesh nor the Kurdish forces operate, allows the Syrian opposition factions to concentrate in the north of Syria, according to political analysts” (RT, 25 August 2016). So, the Syrian opposition factions, backed by Turkey, were represented as fighters who took a role in the war against IS to achieve their self-interests primarily, unlike the SDF fighters who were represented as liberators who fight to save the Syrian people from IS.

In another text, RT reported: “Syrian opposition factions supported by the Turkish army have recaptured more positions from Daesh.” the Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu was quoted as saying: “The Kurdish organizations must withdraw to the East of Euphrates.” Then a Turkish political expert said: “The Kurdish organizations are the biggest threat. Therefore, the Turkish actions concentrate on them, while Daesh is an external threat.” The voiceover commented: “Turkey will not keep its forces in northern Syria, it seeks to transfer the control over these territories to its allied Syrian opposition factions, which serves their interests” (RT, 12 September 2016). Also, Sami Lasmar reported: “After the Turkish army and its allied Syrian factions had taken control over Jarablus, clashes occurred between the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army and Kurdish forces.” The Turkish President was reported as saying through a translator: “We are resolved to clear the region from the terrorist organizations.” The voiceover continued: “Experts say the fast progress of Turkey’s allies against Daesh and the Kurdish organizations helps the Turkish government achieve its aims” (RT, 25 September 2016).

So, RT’s reporters promoted official Turkish voices and messages from non-official sources to show that the opposition factions and Turkey pursue a selfish agenda in the context of the war on IS. This channel did not follow the professional standards of war reporting as the voice of the opposition forces was not heard throughout the sample. RT invited the Arab viewers to question the role of the Syrian opposition factions against IS.

The humanitarian aspect

This section examines the portrayal of the humanitarian aspect of this conflict. I have shown, in the previous section, that the US-backed SDF were represented on RT screen as active agents who seek to clear Syria of IS. So, in line with this positive image, RT represented the US-led military operations in cooperation with the SDF as a humanitarian response to help the people in IS-held areas. To build this portrayal, RT focused on IS's brutality against civilians and relieved the US-led coalition and the SDF of their responsibility in inflicting human suffering in this war. So, RT coverage provided a simple representation, setting boundaries between the liberators or the benefactors [the US-led coalition including the US-backed SDF] and the persecutor [IS].

This discussion starts with the representation of IS identity. RT portrayed the violence committed by IS against civilians, such as deliberate killings, imposing a strict dress code on people, particularly women, or taking them as human shields. RT's reporters allowed civilians who fled IS-held territories to tell stories about IS's oppression, but IS's voice was not represented throughout the sample. For example, RT's reporter Sami Lasmar: "Thousands of civilians, who have escaped from Daesh-held areas in Manbij and Maskana, are sitting in the shade of olive trees to avoid sunburn. These women, elderly people, and children ran from Daesh's persecution." Then, a young man from Manbij said: "Daesh killed our families. The SDF are here to liberate us" (RT, 5 June 2016). Another report by Mohammed Hassan, read: "In addition to imposing ultraconservative dress code on civilians under their control, Daesh

members kill and kidnap those who do not obey their orders.” Then, a woman said: “Daesh forces us to cover our faces and hands. They do not allow us to move freely.” The reporter commented: “Civilians are seeking shelters in the areas controlled by the Military Council of Manbij. They wish to return to their homes after the withdrawal of Daesh” (RT, 16 June 2016). This structure involves a clear distinction between the victims and their persecutor. Giving civilians a voice in this context operates “as a powerful means of introducing moral argument in the news, insofar as it communicates the people’s authentic experience of their suffering as a call for action” (Chouliaraki, 2015, p. 107). Also, RT reported:

According to local sources, Daesh has been under pressure, as the residents of Manbij organized protests, demanding the organization withdraw from the city. Daesh members have killed several protesters, while thousands of women and children have managed to flee the city. Women took off the black veil imposed on them when they left Daesh-held territories, celebrating liberation from the organization's restrictions.

Then, a displaced woman said: “Daesh have humiliated our families. We are starving under their siege.” A family man said: We were under threat of being killed by Daesh, but we survived fortunately” (RT, 20 June 2016). Furthermore, RT reported: “Daesh killed entire families while they were trying to escape from the village of Alnawaja.” A survivor said: “Daesh has planted mines everywhere.” The reporter commented: “Residents, particularly women and children, in IS-held areas, have been living in very hard conditions” A young man said: “We have been

under siege. We have been starving. I have no money to buy milk for my daughter” (RT, 11 July 2016). So, RT used civilian voices to show the tyranny of IS. The reporters portrayed different aspects of suffering for which "Daesh" only was blamed. The abovementioned testimonies showed IS as an aggressor that does not care about the safety of those who live in the ‘Caliphate territories.’ Arab viewers were told that people were starving and were humiliated.

In the same context, Mohammed Hassan reported:

Local sources have reported that there are more than 300 people, under siege in Daesh areas. Women are the most vulnerable group that have suffered from Daesh inhuman practices. Some of them have been separated from their husbands while others have been exposed to sexual harassment and slavery.

In the report, a woman was quoted as saying: "I have been besieged in Daesh’s areas for 2 months. I want to join my husband; he is Kurdish” (RT, 10 August 2016).

RT reporting gives the impression that civilians fled their homes because of IS persecution only, not because of the US-led coalition strikes or the ongoing armed confrontations between the US-backed SDF and IS. RT showed how women have been persecuted and how they have taken off the black veil imposed on them "Daesh" after they fled IS-held territories, which is a marker of freedom from IS. So, civilians in these examples and throughout the sample were used as a source of information about what happened in IS-controlled territories. These witnesses considered the US-backed SDF as liberators. This helps legitimize their actions. In

the light of the examples mentioned above RT emphasized the agency of IS as a persecutor; this news discourse is morally rich to justify the use of military power in Syria through a human discourse which establishes clearly the identity of the aggressor and the victims.

Another central point in the representation of the US-led intervention as a legitimate action is that RT has emphasized that the US-led military operations were conducted with due regard for the safety of the non-combatants in Syria. Furthermore, RT showed the US-backed SDF's members as benefactors who assisted the displaced people. This portrayal of good conduct during the war on terror suppresses the identity of the US-led coalition as a persecutor. In this meaning-making process, the voices of the SDF, as well as civilians, were promoted. For example, A report, by Mohammed Hassan, read:

Arab and Kurdish fighters came from Al Hassaka, Aleppo and Idlib to Manbij in response to the appeals of civilians who suffer from the tyranny of Daesh. Manbij is not their final destination. They will drive Daesh out of Jarablus, Izzaz and Al Bab. As the US-backed SDF have been advancing towards Manbij, they have continued to *provide humanitarian assistance* to displaced people. In the village of Tal Ursh, the Military Council of Manbij *provides humanitarian aid* to civilians (RT, 16 June 2016).

Another report read: "The SDF have been slowly advancing. More than 85% of Manbij's territories became under their control. However, they face difficulty in

recapturing the whole city as they *try to avoid casualties*.” Then, a member of the SDF said: “We came to help our brothers and sisters in Manbij.” Another soldier said: “We managed to liberate some innocent civilians who were taken as human shields by Daesh” (RT, 21 July 2016). The voiceover continued: “The US-led coalition warplanes have striked Daesh’s positions and have *occasionally* caused civilian casualties” (RT, 21 July 2016). The use of the word ‘occasionally’ reduces the impact of the statement; it gives the impression that the coalition tries to minimize the human cost of the airstrikes, but there are unavoidable incidents that occur occasionally. In another report, Alasmar said: “The US-led coalition dropped warning leaflets, asking civilians to leave Al Raqqa. Therefore, hundreds of people fled to the Kurdish-controlled areas.” Then, a displaced person was interviewed; he said: “They say that the US-backed Kurdish forces will attack the city. People are afraid and want to leave Al Raqqa, but *Daesh has prevented them*” (RT, 5 June 2016). Likewise, Hassan reported: “When the SDF resumed military operations against Daesh in Manbij, they *made efforts to avoid civilian causalities*. So, they negotiated with Daesh, offering three initiatives to protect the residents who remained in the city, but to no avail” (RT, 10 August 2016). RT represented the US-backed SDF as responsible fighters who care about the safety of civilians, in contrast to IS that used them as human shields, a contrast which emphasizes the humanity and morality of the US-backed SDF versus their enemy.

The last point in this section is the representation of material damage. RT depicted the damage which resulted from the US-led airstrikes and the ground offensives led by the SDF as collateral, that is, as unintended since it occurred in areas where IS targets operated. RT incorporated voices from the SDF's members and civilians who emphasized the SDF's positive role in Syria. For example, Sami Lasmar reported: "US-led coalition airstrikes and armed clashes between the SDF and Daesh have resulted in huge material damage in Manbij. The central market has been burned to the ground by Daesh." A soldier from the SDF said: "This is Manbij's market. Daesh ordered civilians to evacuate the market and burned it then. Daesh's mission is to destroy everything" (RT, 21 August 2016). Another report read: "The residents of Manbij have started to return gradually to the city where the US-led airstrikes against Daesh have resulted in material destruction. The SDF's members assisted the returnees." A member of the SDF said: "We liberated Manbij for our people and now we exert efforts to help civilians as they return to their homes." A young woman said: "We are happy we returned to our city safely." The voiceover commented: "Dozens of residents returned to the city after they lost some of their relatives who were kidnapped or killed by the terrorist organization" (RT, 13 September 2016). This positive discourse invites audiences to consider the material damage caused by the US-led coalition strikes in Manbij as justifiable since the mission was accomplished and IS was degraded. Hence, RT depicted the suffering inflicted on the Syrians by IS while the US-led coalition and

the SDF were represented as benefactors who "help" and "provide humanitarian aid".

As was the case when representing the military aspect of the US-led intervention, RT covered the humanitarian situation of the conflict from the perspective of the US-led coalition, particularly, the SDF. The sufferers' voice supported the claims made by the US-backed SDF. RT reporters did not provide different views or critical messages.

Findings

This study aimed to examine how RT-Arabic represented the US-led intervention against IS in Syria when its sponsor Russia has been in disagreement with the US on how the common enemy, IS, should be fought. The study found that RT reflected the policies of its government, and this can be noticed through the following results :

-RT emphasized the ineffectiveness of the US war policy and represented the US government in a defensive position. In this context, RT relied on non-identified sources to show the shortcoming of the US war strategy and raise the need for global cooperation to face IS, in this way RT distanced itself while promoting the Russia's preferred messages.

-The military dimension is reported differently to the negatively evaluated war policy. RT showed that the US-backed SDF targeted IS positions, with the desired effect since they used modern weapons and precision bombs. It promoted a one-sided war in which IS was always portrayed in a weak position. RT suppressed the identity of the

US-led coalition as an aggressor. That is to say, RT suppressed the human suffering inflicted by the US-led military campaign in Syria. Then, RT news discourse encouraged Arab audiences to think of the US-led intervention, as morally needed to help the Syrians who have suffered from IS violence. A significant factor that helps explain the positive coverage of the US-led military actions by RT-Arabic, in this context, is that both Russia and the US were targeted by IS. According to Yarchi et al. (2013), when the country in which the media operate is a victim of terrorism, this motivates its media to support the armed actions taken by another country against terror groups. Also, RT's representation of the US-backed SDF as liberators is consistent with Russia's policies since they targeted IS, and they did not fight against Russia or the Syrian regime.

-The anti-IS operations, which were conducted by Syrian opposition factions were contextualized in terms of the common interests between these factions and Turkey in the North of Syria. Thus, variations noticed in the representation of war policy, the military actions and the humanitarian aspect can best be explained in terms of the Russian policies

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