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## Preface

The Syrian crisis began early in 2011 and coincided with demonstrations, riots and more significant episodes of violence in other Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain. In the outside world and especially from a Western perspective, these situations were simply lumped together under the misleading term “Arab spring”. This simplistic perception of complex, diverse and unique events with distinctive characteristics in each of those countries illustrated the power of propaganda. In the hands of outside agencies it interfered from the very beginning in the course of the Syrian crisis and helped to create a narrative that either helped or harmed those who were involved in it. It also enabled those outside agencies to advance their own agendas in the Middle East and even in the global arena.

Verbal and visual propaganda was orchestrated through the wide possibilities offered by the newly available information and communication technologies. It was defined by the importance assigned to the purely internal factors of the Syrian crisis and that which it assigned to the decisions and movements of external actors. At a secondary and more tactical level, propaganda operated according to one of those two strategic frameworks. If the aim was to present the Syrian crisis as one provoked only by the country’s internal conditions, the complex Syrian reality would be subjected to simplification, distortion and disinformation not only in terms of the facts themselves

but their chronological sequence. But the propaganda was also applied to what international actors were doing in Syria, with respect both to their particular interests and their long-term relations with the country.

While the propagandistic aim of those regional and global powers which supported one or more of the Syrian groups that violently rose against the state was to present to the world an amplified and distorted view of the internal elements of the Syrian crisis, the strategy of the government was rather different. From the very beginning and with strategic motives Damascus virtually abandoned any massive external propaganda effort. One possible reason for this was the inferiority of its media resources in comparison with those of its external enemies, in particular the challenge of communicating with a global audience ignorant of Syria's cultural past, its multi- and inter-religious social fabric and a long history shaped by its role as a battleground in every era from ancient times to the present. Paradoxically, the very elements of Syria's situation which were ignored by the outside world were the ones that permitted the establishment to sustain its internal narrative, mobilizing a considerable part of the population around the idea of resistance – *muqawama* – to Syria's internal and external enemies. During the worst moments of the crisis this idea was projected as a victory in itself. Even many Syrians, who at the beginning of the crisis rose up against a government which they criticised because of the economic situation, political stagnation, low regard for human rights and other issues, sided with a non-religious state acting as the only guarantor of Syria's multi-faith and multi-ethnic society. This strategic stance and the unexpected alliance it created proved resistant to the short-term impact of breaking news often presented in simple black-and-white terms or with a swift conclusion, as it was in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

A Western media narrative, largely based on a misrepresentation of the internal situation in Syria and combined with the low profile adopted by the Syrian government, explains why after

being in the global news for more than nine years the country is even more unknown than it was before the crisis. This paradox has helped to transform into almost universally accepted truths facts and situations which are distorted or even wholly detached from reality.

Approaching the Syrian crisis with these matters in mind, this book presents and analyses the different propaganda strategies and tactics used by the several agencies involved in the events which have occurred since 2011, and sometimes earlier. Moreover, and from a historical perspective, it also sets out the various political, military, sociological and cultural elements that could clarify the different hues of such a long and complex crisis. The purely internal causes of the crisis, both immediate and remote, are set out and framed according to the historical trajectory of those local actors involved on it. The external agencies of the Syrian crisis are also identified and contextualised, the very agencies that are so often ignored by the Western media in their internally oriented narrative of what is happening in Syria. These are presented either as regional or global agencies, whether against or in support of the Syrian government, and their immediate as well as long-standing motives for intervening in Syria are also set out. The overall aim of this book is to give some basic clues to the Syrian crisis, both in its internal and external dimensions. It focuses on those factors that can shape Syria's future just as they have shaped it since the country gained its independence.

In writing this book I have combined an exhaustive bibliographical review of scholarly texts in English, French, Spanish and Arabic with field research. In the midst of the crisis and in order to work with oral sources I travelled to Syria, a nation already known to me thanks to family and professional connections, but also to other countries in the Middle East and other regions linked to Syria. I conducted extensive interviews with those who are familiar with the Syrian crisis, ranging from scholars to religious leaders, NGO personnel on the ground and

members of the Syrian emigré community. Among those I interviewed is the Syrian President, Bashar al Assad, who offered me his deep perspective on the crisis and on the country's past and future. The many lecture hours which I have spent explaining Syria to my students at Madrid Complutense University, the University of Sussex and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki under the Erasmus scheme, and at the University of Chile, among other institutions, encouraged me to refine the contents of this book. I owe much to the always interesting and stimulating questions, doubts and comments aired by my students, especially those whom I assisted with their thesis and other academic endeavours. Finally I must thank Andrew Crisell, Professor Emeritus at the University of Sunderland, for his copy-editing assistance and valuable advice.

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