

## Artículo de investigación

## Information aspects of «hybrid war» in the syrian conflict and their influence on positions of participants of confrontation

Aspectos de información de la «guerra híbrida» en el conflicto sirio y su influencia en las posiciones de los participantes de la confrontación  
Aspectos informativos da “guerra híbrida” no conflito sírio e sua influência nas posições dos participantes do confronto

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the special aspects of the information-psychological conflict between the parties to the conflict as a "hybrid war" element. The article deals with the content and scope of the information-psychological confrontation, carried out by both the main and indirect participants of the Syrian conflict. The degree of influence of the Syrian conflict on the positions, actions and methods of achieving the goals of the parties to the conflict is analyzed in this work. The methods of information influence, the possibility of their application and effectiveness in the conditions of changes in the positions of the parties to the conflict are shown in the research.

Special attention is paid to the role of regional states (Saudi, Arabia, Qatar) and Western countries (primarily the United States of America) in the information campaign in Syria, the media they use as part of a "hybrid war" to defend their interests and the interests of the oppositional groups they support. The article considers the features of the influence of information war on the positions of participants and their changes after the Russian Federation intervention in the conflict, which has become the object of a powerful information confrontation.

To analyze the problem a structural-functional approach as well as a comparative method and case study were used.

### Resumen

El propósito de este estudio es identificar los aspectos especiales del conflicto de información psicológica entre las partes del conflicto como un elemento de "guerra híbrida". El artículo trata sobre el contenido y el alcance de la confrontación psicológica de la información, llevada a cabo por los participantes principales e indirectos del conflicto sirio. En este trabajo se analiza el grado de influencia del conflicto sirio en las posiciones, acciones y métodos para lograr los objetivos de las partes en el conflicto. Los métodos de influencia de la información, la posibilidad de su aplicación y efectividad en las condiciones de los cambios en las posiciones de las partes en conflicto se muestran en la investigación.

Se presta especial atención al papel de los estados regionales (Arabia Saudita, Qatar) y occidentales (principalmente los Estados Unidos de América) en la campaña de información en Siria, los medios que utilizan como parte de una "guerra híbrida" para defender sus intereses y los intereses de los grupos de oposición que ellos apoyan. El artículo considera las características de la influencia de la guerra de información en las posiciones de los participantes y sus cambios después de la intervención de la Federación de Rusia en el conflicto, que se ha convertido en el objeto de una poderosa confrontación de información.

As a result of the conducted research the authors came to the conclusion that the influence of the "hybrid war" in the aspect of information-psychological confrontation on the positions of the parties to the conflict, their actions against each other, methods and ways of defending their own interests can not be questioned.

Moreover the individual elements of the information war used by both the main and indirect participants in the Syrian confrontation or their combination significantly complicate the processes of political settlement of the conflict, because under their influence the positions of the parties that are able to stop the bloodshed become diametrically opposed or completely antagonistic.

**Keywords:** Syria, information-psychological confrontation, "hybrid war", Syrian government, opposition, terrorist organizations, conflict resolution.

Para analizar el problema, se utilizó un enfoque estructural-funcional, así como un método comparativo y un estudio de caso.

Como resultado de la investigación realizada, los autores llegaron a la conclusión de que la influencia de la "guerra híbrida" en el aspecto de la información-confrontación psicológica sobre las posiciones de las partes en el conflicto, sus acciones entre sí, los métodos y formas de defender sus propios intereses no puede ser cuestionado.

Además, los elementos individuales de la guerra de información utilizados por los participantes principales e indirectos en la confrontación siria o su combinación complican significativamente los procesos de resolución política del conflicto, porque bajo su influencia las posiciones de las partes que son capaces de detener el derramamiento de sangre convertirse en diametralmente opuesto o completamente antagónico.

**Palabras clave:** Siria, confrontación psicológica de la información, "guerra híbrida", gobierno sirio, oposición, organizaciones terroristas, resolución de conflictos.

## Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é identificar os aspectos especiais do conflito informação-psicológico entre as partes no conflito como um elemento de "guerra híbrida". O artigo trata do conteúdo e do escopo do confronto psicológico-informacional, realizado pelos participantes principais e indiretos do conflito sírio. O grau de influência do conflito sírio sobre as posições, ações e métodos para alcançar os objetivos das partes em conflito é analisado neste trabalho. Os métodos de influência da informação, a possibilidade de sua aplicação e efetividade nas condições de mudanças nas posições das partes em conflito são mostrados na pesquisa.

Especial atenção é dada ao papel dos estados regionais (Arábia Saudita, Catar) e países ocidentais (principalmente Estados Unidos da América) na campanha de informação na Síria, a mídia que eles usam como parte de uma "guerra híbrida" para defender seus interesses e os interesses dos grupos de oposição que eles apoiam. O artigo considera as características da influência da guerra de informação sobre as posições dos participantes e suas mudanças após a intervenção da Federação Russa no conflito, que se tornou objeto de um poderoso confronto de informações.

Para analisar o problema, utilizou-se uma abordagem estrutural-funcional, um método comparativo e um estudo de caso.

Como resultado da pesquisa realizada, os autores chegaram à conclusão de que a influência da "guerra híbrida" no aspecto de confrontação psicológico-informacional sobre as posições das partes em conflito, suas ações entre si, métodos e formas de conflito. defender seus próprios interesses não pode ser questionado.

Além disso, os elementos individuais da guerra de informação usada pelos participantes principais e indiretos no confronto sírio ou sua combinação complicam significativamente os processos de solução

política do conflito, porque sob sua influência as posições dos partidos que são capazes de parar o derramamento de sangue tornar-se diametralmente oposta ou completamente antagônica.

**Palavras-chave:** Síria, confronto informação-psicológica, "guerra híbrida", governo sírio, oposição, organizações terroristas, resolução de conflitos.

## Introduction

Consideration of the "hybrid war" information components is an urgent problem not only for the main and indirect participants, but also for specialists engaged in the study of the Syrian conflict. The urgency lies in the fact that the information-psychological confrontation between the subjects of the settlement and the tendency to increase the degree of its influence on the positions of the participants is the most important moment in this conflict.

The elements of the "hybrid war" make it difficult to a considerable extent to find an optimal settlement model, as the interests of the parties interested in the conflict settlement are transformed as a result of their impact and instead of constructive actions aimed at a ceasefire we see mutual provocations and accusations.

Hence the conclusion that only the interactions of states taking into account not only their own interests but the desire to settle the conflict and stop bloodshed will help to reduce the level of escalation and come to a common opinion on the existing fundamental differences.

The information-psychological war manifestations, especially in the context of their influence on the transformation of the positions of the participants and the development of the political conflict, have not been sufficiently studied. As a result the problem can be considered relevant. The recommendations given in the article can be used by the authorities, public and political structures of states involved in the settlement of the conflict.

## Methods

Initially the Syrian conflict began as a domestic issue with little use of the "hybrid war" elements, but quickly acquired an armed character. Over time and during the other countries intervention the achievement of the goals and standing up for private national interests in the region through the planned and versatile use of elements of confrontation in the information field both for

political opponents and for own allies and civilians were made the cornerstone.

For example Western governments alliance led by the United States of America realized that the forces of the "moderate opposition" alone with the information support weren't enough for deposing the government of B. Asad and began to provide them with military assistance. There are facts proving the involvement of USA and Western intelligence agencies in the creation of the terrorist group "Islamic State". Thus this group very quickly became strong and numerous, well-armed and able to compete with the sovereign Syrian state.

But after the military intervention of Russia the terrorists began to incur large losses, lost control over the territories and were forced to rethink the tactics of the "hybrid war" since the used ones were no longer effective. Therefore the information aspect of this phenomenon was fully revealed, moreover in full accordance with the definitions of leading experts in this field it became a key one (Manoilo, 2015).

The case study is used as a methodology in this article. It allows us to consider in detail the information confrontation as an element of the "hybrid war" and its influence on the conflict development. The structural and functional approach was also used in the work which helped determine the influence of information counteraction on the positions of the parties to the conflict, their actions and ways of achieving political goals.

## Results and discussion

As in a number of conflicts that occurred in the countries of the Arab East in 2010-2011 which were later called "Arab spring" in academic literature, Syria was no exception for the penetration of various "hybrid war" manifestations. Since the beginning of the conflict and the appearance of the first anti-government statements in March 2011 the parties widely used the means of information and psychological

pressure. They were the main tool for influencing the consciousness of the population.

The usage of misinformation took an important place at the information confrontation. The means of its dissemination were traditional media (television, radio, press) and the Internet (Semenov, 2014). The misinformation concerned the use of violence against civilians by the Syrian authorities, the destruction of the state system, the transfer of the political elite representatives and military leadership of the country to the side of the opposition, taking control of individual settlements and cities of the country. In return the Syrian government actions were aimed at refuting the incoming information, grading the scale of events in the country, informing the population about compromises and concessions carried out by the authorities. It was apparent since the first months of the conflict between the authorities and the opposition that the preponderance in the information confrontation is inclined towards the opposition. It was shown by the increase in social activity, mass protests and public speeches, as well as loss of control over certain areas of the country. The superiority in the information campaign carried out by the opposition and directed against B. Assad's regime in the conditions of the "hybrid war" became possible thanks to the help of the regional states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc.) and a number of Western countries, primarily the USA. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict the activity of pro-Western information resources (Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, CNN, BBC, Euronews, etc.) disseminating misinformation about the events in Syria has been observed.

At the same time these information agencies used various information countermeasures tools. In this aspect we could support the Russian researcher E.V. Martynenko, who observes that "in such kind of wars a full range of means and tools is usually used: from direct lies to "subtle" ways of presenting information with true content - forms, the sequence of information, its repetition, the selection of the time structure etc., and also blocking the dissemination of unwanted information, its interpretation (it is especially relevant in point of disputable information)" (Martynenko, 2016).

The Syrian conflict is characterized by the representation of rather extreme points of view of the confrontational parts, in which there is a

unilateral submission of information about the process of development of the conflict, ways and methods of its settlement. Actions of one side are fully approved, and actions of the other side cause negative perception. Information means of conflict management as an element of the "hybrid war" had a great influence on the behavior and actions of the Syrian government and opposition groups, as well as terrorist organizations. It affected not only the conduct of direct military operations by the parties to the conflict, but also the process of its political settlement, manifested in three aspects in particular: the cessation of hostilities, the provision of humanitarian assistance and the process of political transition.

Information support combined with financial and political components contributed to the rapid ground gaining and occupation of a large territory of the country by armed groups. On the political side strong information pressure from the Arab East (Saudi Arabia, Qatar) as well as Western countries did not contribute to the formation of effective international formats for the settlement of the conflict, the dignified appearance of the political opposition and the development of solutions that suit all parties, including the Syrian government.

The information-psychological confrontation between the authorities and the opposition as an instrument of a "hybrid war" helped to correct and change their positions as the conflict developed. For example, the Syrian government made a number of concessions to the opposition and stated the need for reforms in the country (Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down rebellion). At the same time the emergence of a widespread opposition using not only political but also armed methods of struggle forced the country's leadership to apply a wider range of counteraction methods, including power.

At the same time the opponents of the Assad regime, realizing the futility of using only information measures, contributed directly or indirectly to the formation of various opposition groups, less prone to a peaceful settlement but increasingly dependent from the political and financial standpoints on foreign "sponsors".

In the process of conflict development the content of the information confrontation also changed: the parties accused each other of violating international agreements, using violence against their own citizens, killing civilians, using

prohibited weapons, using foreign mercenaries, and failures in the fight against terrorists. For example an interesting direction is the usage of the information pressure means around the situation connected with the chemical weapons.

After the intervention of the Russian Federation in the conflict and the counter-terrorist operation, the situation in the conflict zone has changed significantly. The Syrian regime was significantly strengthened from the political, institutional and moral-psychological standpoints, and various opposition groups joined the process of political settlement and began to participate in the dialogues (Timur Z. Mansurov, 2016).

In the changed situation Russia became the object of a powerful information confrontation (Krivenko, 2017), accused of supporting the dictatorial regime of B. Asad, the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the country, accompanied by the death of civilians, as well as in impeding the negotiation process.

The "hybrid war" tools used in the conflict demonstrate the changing of the positions of the parties quite clearly. In the context of information war the strengthening of the Syrian regime, manifested in particular in the formulation of more stringent and sometimes ultimatum positions in the negotiations, contributed to a number of concessions from the opposition. For example the frequency of belligerent statements by opposition representatives leading armed actions in Syria and aimed at a peaceful settlement of the conflict, as well as considering the possibility of B. Assad's participation in the transitional political process, has been reduced.

The positions of the indirect conflict participants were also adjusted. In particular Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar were forced to limit the assistance to the oppositional groups under their control, depending on the development of military operations in the conflict zone and the reflection in the media.

The information and political pressure exerted by Russia on other parties to the conflict facilitated the adoption of a number of important treaties and agreements that have advanced the process of political settlement. The United States and European countries could not ignore Russia's position in connection with the changed situation and the strengthening of the B. Asad regime and were forced to make several concessions on

such areas of cooperation as a cease-fire, the delineation of moderate opposition and terrorist groups, humanitarian assistance, political transition process.

It's interesting to note the influence of the media on the position of the United States and European countries regarding the participation of B. Assad in the transitional process, which occasionally changed (Tillerson: Assad family reign coming to end, only issue is how to bring it about). Russia in turn switched to support the Syrian regime and maintain a favorable international image, which forced it to disagree with a number of actions taken by the government in the Syrian conflict (the prevalence of force methods over the negotiations (Bagdonas, 2012), denying the possibility of giving the autonomy to the Kurds in the country's political system and etc.).

The impact of the "hybrid war" on the terrorist groups involved in the Syrian confrontation should not go unnoticed. In the first place, such an impact concerns organizations such as the Islamic State and Jabhat an Nusra. It lies in the fact that Western countries to relation of which there are isolated facts proving the support of terrorists, have become more and more often declaring war on them. In our opinion this was carried out as part of an information war against the Russian Federation, possibly in order to conceal their separate intentions and interests.

The narrowing or cessation of support channels has forced terrorist groups to reconsider their priorities regarding the choice of "allies". Also as an example of information impact one can cite the result of European politicians' statements about the confrontation with terrorists, which resulted in a series of terrorist acts in these states (Acts of a terrorist nature in Paris on November 13, 2015).

In turn, the Russian intelligence agencies actively oppose terrorist organizations first of all the "Islamic state" in the virtual space. The members of this organization constantly create YouTube channels, where they show propaganda videos inspiring the desire to join it, because in their opinion the day is theirs. The Russian intelligence agencies detect such channels and block them but well equipped and trained in terms of using computer and other equipment terrorists quickly create new ones.

For its part, the legitimate government of the Syrian republic conducts active propaganda,

motivational and patriotic videos are broadcasted on the Internet, correspondents and military journalists take and publish their interviews or publications on the worldwide network. Such actions attributed by the authors to the information aspect of the "hybrid war" forced terrorists to use something similar for their supporters more often and effectively (Ionita, 2016), because before that if they had any prayer or enlightenment videos it was not often and now they do it almost every day. The current situation forces us to develop better means of information counteraction.

### Summary

According to the data obtained from the study of sources it may be reasonable to conclude the Syrian conflict combines various elements of the "hybrid war", and after the intervention of the Russian Aerospace Forces they have significantly increased, and the information aspect has become the cornerstone. Based on the impact of the regional and global media as well as propaganda and counter-propaganda, the positions of the participants in this confrontation are constantly changing.

These changes are noticeable in the use of methods and ways of confronting the Syrian legitimate government and the Russian troops by the opposition and terrorist organizations, which under the influence of information confrontation have changed significantly. The means used by the "hybrid war" complicate the process of political settlement of the conflict, because under their influence the positions of the parties become diametrically opposed.

### Conclusions

As part of the development of the conflict in Syria, it is important to consider such an aspect of the "hybrid war" as information and psychological pressure on the opponent. Now that the opposition and terrorist groups, primarily the Islamic State and Jabhat An Nusra, have suffered heavy losses in manpower and technology, they are forced to wage war in other ways. As can be seen from the dynamics of this conflict, new methods of confronting the legitimate government of Syria are no less, or even more effective, than the classical ones.

But most noticeable is the impact of the information aspects of the "hybrid war" on the

positions of the parties to the Syrian conflict, because due to the impact of all media involved in this confrontation, the positions, goals and interests are changing, which makes it necessary to seek new approaches and dialogue formats for conflict resolution.

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