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DIGITAL PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION GENERATED VIA ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: THE ISRAEL/ PALESTINE CONFLICT AND THE FALL OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD IN SYRIA CASE STUDIES

Abstract

In this paper, the author will analyze the role of digital propaganda and disinformation generated via artificial intelligence (AI) in the ongoing Middle Eastern conflicts, with a focus on the escalation of conflict between Israel and Palestine, as well as the overthrow of the President of the Syrian Republic Bashar al-Assad. In this geographical framework, the author will examine how technologies based on AI, and primarily the generation of deepfake materials, have a use value in conflict zones, tracing the first steps of use of such tactics for war purposes in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. By confirming the presence and influence of this type of cyber operations through the analysis of two case studies, the author will confirm the hypothesis, which states that contemporary digital propaganda, aided and generated via AI, significantly complicates the course of ongoing events, thus leading to inevitable conflict escalation, making it difficult to distinguish the truth from lies, in both military and political context. With the use of the content analysis method, focused on the identification of instances of placement of AI-generated digital propaganda, this paper

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will present a comprehensive analysis and study of individual cases of Israel/Palestine and the Syrian Republic to create a framework of possibilities and influence of such content on classical armed conflicts, as well as on political crises in the Middle East.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, digital propaganda, disinformation, machine learning, deep learning, deepfake, Middle East, Israel/Palestine, Syria

INTRODUCTION

Looking at the history of humanity and the course of wars that have marked the world, it is noticeable that every state of war leads to finding new solutions for old problems, thus initiating the development of technology and the creation of new ideas. For example, World War One marked the following three pivotal changes in the warfare paradigm: industrialization, the introduction of the third dimension of warfare through the use of planes, and enabling action against the enemy in depth (Zabecki 2015, 2–3). On the other hand, World War Two will forevermore remain marked by the development and the use of the atomic bomb, but also the radar technology, which ensured the possibility of early detection and thus an early response to the potential attack of the enemy forces (Genuth 1988, 276). After the two world wars and joint efforts of the international community towards the preservation of peace, the polarization of the world and the presence of two powerful blocks – the Western and the Eastern, conditioned the development of techniques in a different direction, focusing on subversive action, the proliferation of intelligence work, but also on the methodology of covert participation in a conflict, such as proxy wars. In such a constellation of maintaining the seeming peace, the first steps in psychological, electronic and cyber warfare, directed towards a continued destabilization of the enemy ranks, were made. Therefore, we can naturally conclude that the pioneers of the academic community, motivated by the idea of predicting the appearance of the next grand war, depicted the potential World War Three within the framework of conflicts “from afar”, with the use of advanced technology

of the information technology field. In the seventies of the 20th century, Canadian media theoretician Marshal McLuhan presented his prophecy regarding the form of World War Three, predicting that it would be a “guerilla information war, with no divisions between military and civilian participation” (Forest 2021, 13).

In the spirit of previously identified pivotal paradigms of warfare during the two world wars, and bearing in mind the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which contemporary political scientists characterized as a “critical juncture”, “point of no return” and “an introduction to World War Three”, we confirm the idea that the state of war opens up a space and motivates the experts into seeking new solutions for old problems. What significantly dominate the Russian-Ukrainian battlefield, and thus the Russian-Ukrainian sky, are the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), the use of satellites, hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks, as well as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which all fall into a broader category of “information technologies”, by the prophecy of academic thinkers from the end of the 20th century. Therefore, if we indeed treated the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as an overture into World War Three, we could confirm that McLuhan’s prophecy is coming true. Thus, in this “information war”, we also notice some new action factors, such as advanced UAVs and AI tools. Therefore, we identify these two as segments worth further research, whilst the main focus of this research is on the perspectives of AI tools.

The primacy of studying the application of AI instead of UAVs in this paper does not mean that the aforementioned technology has a lesser value. On the contrary, as a developing sector, the production of UAVs is still recording significant improvements, thus providing various amenities to the conflict participants. However, the extensive amount of research material on this topic, as well as the previously completed studies of the practice and experiences taken from the use of UAVs in war zones, already fill the academic vacuum that used to exist regarding this field. Namely, extensive use of UAVs in the territories of Ukraine and the Russian Federation (RF) was expected and predictable, bearing in mind that the post-Soviet geographical space, which includes these two countries as well, already registered such practices during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war in the fall of

2020. Previously present in Libya¹, in the Syrian warzone, amongst the Hezbollah ranks, as well as in the hands of the Houthi rebel group in Yemen (see Đorić i Kazić 2021), etc., the use of UAVs during the war in Nagorno-Karabakh was not a novelty in the field of warfare, but it still represented a significant game-changer in the modality of the use of this type of a combat system in the conflict zone. Namely, during this conflict, the use of UAVs for the sake of propaganda was registered, given that Baku publicly showcased video footage of completed missions against the Armenian targets, elevating in this way its' population morale. Similar techniques of spreading propaganda are recorded in the Russian-Ukrainian battlefield as well. However, we must stress that Ukraine and Russia went a step further in this context by placing deepfake video footage of presidents of the enemy states, used for propaganda, thus attracting attention to this new practice.

Only twenty days after the launch of the Special Military Operation (SMO) of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, on March 16, 2022, video footage of President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky (*Володимир Зеленський*) was published on the hacked webpage of the Ukrainian TV station *Ukrayina 24*, in which he addressed the nation (Pearson and Zinets 2022; Majchrzak 2023, 49). At first glance, the appearance of Zelensky seems credible, marked by details characteristic of Zelensky's addresses at the beginning of the war – military shirt, minimalist background, emotional speeches, and directly addressing the people. However, after listening to it, most Ukrainians rejected the video footage, deeming it fake, which was also confirmed by the Ukrainian Presidency in record time. Bearing in mind the content of the speech – which called upon the Ukrainians to surrender and capitulate, it is indicative that fast detection of faked footage prevented significant losses on the Ukrainian battlefield since following through this order of the Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces would at least cause desertion and open up space for Russian Forces to take

¹ There is a common stance that the Turkish defense industry tested the operability of its UAV *Bayraktar TB2* in Libya, often referred to as the “drone war” in the academic and scientific communities and that it further advanced the techniques of warfare with the use of this UAV during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, achieving unmitigated success and thus attracting the interest of numerous countries worldwide for this product. See Al-Dhahab 2019.

over strategic positions. Despite the failure of this propaganda attack, this deepfake pointed to the new use value of artificial intelligence in conflicts, forecasting their increasing occurrence in the conflicts to follow. In this context, experts in the domain of the theory of AI application stress that even though the Russian-Ukrainian conflict intensified the development of AI for war purposes, its full capacity will be reached in the near-future conflicts, especially within the Israel-Palestine conflict (Eisele and Steinwehr 2023).

In this context, it is important to stress that the said deepfake video footage emerged as a response to a Ukrainian attempt at subversion of the morale of the Russian Forces active within the enemy lines a little earlier, within the first two weeks of the conflict.² The said deepfake video footage, which raised media attention only after the appearance of the faked video footage of Zelensky, depicted Vladimir Putin (*Владимир Владимирович Путин*), the President of the Russian Federation, addressing the Russian nation, in which he proclaimed a ceasefire, the beginning of peace negotiations with Ukraine and recognized the independence of Crimea as a Republic within the Ukrainian borders (Baig 2022). When posted on *Twitter*, it initially did not attract significant attention. Namely, the deepfake manipulations distorted the material, and the video footage was visually familiar to the broader public, contrary to the video footage of Zelensky, which mimicked and was identical to the uniform appearance of the Ukrainian President from the beginning of the conflict.

Despite the failure of these two initiatives, we can rightfully state that the breakthrough in the development of AI, and especially machine learning as a tool from the analytical artificial intelligence (see Đorić i Kazić 2021) specter enabling the construction of deepfake content, enlisted this method of manipulations within the future tools of information warfare and psychological operations, thus prompting us to give this new phenomenon special academic attention, not only in the context of understanding the technique of construction of materials of

² It is estimated that this video footage was created after February 21, 2022, since the deepfake technique changed the content of Putin's speech, while the video footage remained intact, representing the footage of Vladimir Putin's address to the nation after the recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk, two separatist regions in the south of Ukraine. See Baig 2022.

this sort but also understanding and identification of their presence in other ongoing conflicts and political crises, such as the current conflict between Israel and Palestine, as well as the recent overthrow of the President of the Syrian Republic Bashar al-Assad and consequential intensification of the political and security crisis in this country, which will both be presented further in this paper as case studies. I justify the selection of these cases by noting that the case of the Israel/Palestine conflict has a military character, and al-Bashar's overthrow presents as a political crisis, thus enabling the generation of case studies from the same geographical region but in different contexts. The case studies are selected to confirm the hypothesis that such propaganda tends to escalate the existing conflicts and crises, thus making it difficult to distinguish truth from lies.

To create a theoretical framework for the research, the key terms – propaganda, digital propaganda, information war, disinformation, artificial intelligence, and synthetic media will be defined as follows. Propaganda implies the spread of attitudes, facts, arguments and details, including false and fake ones, to create an attitude of the general public regarding some issue, whilst digital propaganda implies the conduct of this action via digital media. Propaganda action can be constant and conducted in times of peace and war, usually to create a positive image regarding an issue of significance for one's society. In contrast, information war, which implies the creation and placement of propaganda, is conducted just before and especially during a "conventional, hybrid or cold war" (Kotelenets and Barabash 2019, 369), intended to discredit the enemy. During the spread of propaganda and especially during information war, the focus is on the placement of disinformation. We define disinformation as intentionally and consciously created fake information directed towards deception of the message recipient (Bereskin 2023, 6), with the final goal of gaining political, economic or military benefit (Majchrzak 2023, 43). In the chain of actions, disinformation is the smallest unit used for spreading propaganda, while propaganda can, but does not have to be a part of a much greater operation – information war. In the end, we define artificial intelligence as the ability of a machine to fulfil tasks and other functions which, by the nature of things, imply human factors, such as reasoning, planning, learning and creativity (Majchrzak 2023, 44), while synthetic media is

media content (text, video footage, audio footage, photograph, visual display) generated via artificial intelligence (Bereskin 2023, 25).

THE PAST AND PRESENT OF PROPAGANDA: THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FACTOR

Spreading propaganda towards an enemy is neither the construct of the 20th century nor a novelty within the manipulation techniques (Sayler and Harris 2022, 1) since its emergence coincides with the birth of humanity. Having reviewed examples of significant propaganda activities since the times of ancient civilizations to the present day, we propose the following historical division of the chronology of propaganda:

The mythological propaganda phase characterizes the creation of traditions, myths and legends about a ruler, historical event or other prominent individuals. Predominantly based on oral tradition, representation through monuments, artistic paintings and cultural goods, such propaganda campaigns were directed predominantly towards the local population, given their inability to emit messages to distant regions.³

The mechanical propaganda phase began in 1440 with the mechanization of propaganda production with the help of Gutenberg's printing press. Since the mid-fifteenth century, the printing press and other tools invented in the 20th century, such as radio stations, film production, and television, enabled the faster spread of propaganda and reached broader public masses. Propaganda was at its peak in pre-war and war times when it served to not only deceive the enemy but also increase recruitment capacities by strengthening the morale of both combatants and non-combatants (see Sostaric 2019).

The digital propaganda phase began with the commercialization of the Internet, especially with the emergence of various social networks and platforms, such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter*, during the first decade of the 21st century. What is characteristic of this phase is not necessarily the faster access to the target group and decentralized action towards broader masses but the transition of propaganda from

³ A good example is Ramses II, who placed disinformation after the Battle of Kadesh in 1274 b.c. which presented the outcome as the victory of Egypt by instructing stonemasons to inscribe the temples with stories of this victory. See Ingenia 2022.

the state to the private sphere, thus opening up a path for the influence of non-state actors on state politics. The clearest examples of effective action of civilians in terms of propaganda are the movements which initiated uprisings during the Arab Spring in the Middle East and the propaganda operation of automatized Russian bots during the US presidential elections in 2016.⁴

The synthetic propaganda phase builds on the digital propaganda phase, nourishing a causal relationship, bearing in mind that synthetic propaganda material uses digital media to emit propaganda into the ether. This phase begins with the first advances in the field of machine learning, a tool from the analytical artificial intelligence (see Kazić 2023b) specter, especially with the breakthroughs in the domain of deep understanding, thanks to which a complex technique codenamed *Adversarial Network – GAN*, was constructed, in 2014. With the help of this technique, the artificial intelligence system learns from available audio, video footage and photographs, acquiring the ability to create entirely new content afterwards. With the use of two algorithmic forms – a *generator*, which creates new content, and a *discriminator*, which grades its reliability and plausibility, it is possible to create completely fake content which reliably depicts the term or the individuals they refer to (Busch and Ware 2023, 2). Because these contents are generated via deep learning methods, the products of generative adversarial networks are codenamed deepfake, literally meaning – deeply faked content, synthetic material.

Deepfake content, therefore, refers to synthetic video, audio or photographic content generated via the deep learning method, to falsify the source material and its modification into content depicting something else. When speaking of video footage, deepfake refers to content that represents tampered video materials. This means that the footage was altered in the video editing process to present that someone else is performing a specific action. The audio recording can also be modified to attribute different statements to the individual featured in the original footage. Finally, visual synthetic content refers

⁴ In this case, Russian bots succeeded in polarizing the US voting body on the eve of the 2016 presidential elections by spreading disinformation about the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, at the same time promoting the Republican candidate, Donald Trump. See Ross, Vaccari, and Chadwick 2022.

to photographs created via deep learning, which can be a changed variant of the original photos or new products generated in line with the recognized sentiment to incite new feelings among the target group.

DEEPPAKE TECHNOLOGY IN WAR ZONES AND POLITICAL CRISES: CASE STUDIES

The use value of all three synthetic products is broad, and such contents have penetrated the world of politics and war zones, which the selected case studies will confirm. However, before stepping into case study analyses, it is necessary to identify the potential forms of appearance of these products to adequately assess the relevance of their use in contemporary and future political and war propaganda.

Synthetic video footage – deepfake video footage, has been present in cyberspace since 2017 (Sayler and Harris 2022, 1), whereas they have been appearing in political circles regularly since 2018. Since then, the creation of synthetic video footage for political purposes became the rule and not an exception to the practice, thus only fortifying the existing propaganda machinery. This especially opened the path towards spreading propaganda among the youngest political actors, who predominantly keep informed via social networks. Since 2022, the presence of synthetic video footage has been recorded in the war zone as well, starting from the previously mentioned speeches of Putin and Zelensky and spreading to other conflict zones as well afterwards.

Synthetic audio footage, until now, has usually been incorporated into deepfake video footage, which is confirmed by the previously mentioned faked speeches of Putin and Zelensky, in which the course of discourse was fake, and the voice of the presumed interlocutors was original. The most representative example of synthetic audio material is the faked address of Bashar al-Assad, the former President of the Syrian Republic, which gained significant popularity in the days of his overthrow, as described later in the text. Therefore, it is necessary to stress that audio footage also has its use value as a synthetically generated propaganda material and part of information war, given that they have significant potential as a tool for enemy deception, especially the enemy forces in the conflict zones.

Finally, synthetic photographs represent a product generated via AI, most present in the digital space, given the wide spread of platforms and apps that enable the production of such materials. Keeping in mind that photograph as a method of spreading propaganda most often has the goal of inciting the emotions of the viewer, the most representative example of deepfake photographs are the faked photos of the suffering of children in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, present more on the Palestinian side.

Thus, all three categories of faked content have significant potential for distorting the perception of some political crisis or conflict. Therefore, it is noteworthy to identify modalities and situations in which they appear most often. Regarding faked video footage, the corpus of examined materials enables us to conclude that the objective of such propaganda materials is to discredit the opponent (Byman et al. 2023, 6–8) but also faking orders, confirmed by the previously described instances of faked video footage of Putin and Zelensky, in which the necessity of ceasefire and laying down the arms is insinuated, as well as, in the case of Ukraine, surrender, but also causing confusion among the local population and initiation of conflict, as was the case with Gabon.⁵, in which the faked video footage's content legitimised the organization of a coup d'état (7). Synthetic audio footage has the same destructive power as the synthetic video footage. However, it is significant to stress that, in times of war, such materials could be used for transmitting faked audio footage via radio equipment to the troops in the field, thus enabling giving fake orders, causing confusion, and potentially even defeatism among the unit members. Finally, faked photographs are created for polarization of the society and diminishing the support to the enemy forces (8), and especially for inciting the wished sentiments and turning the public opinion to the side of the actors represented in these photos, as was the case with the photographs of the suffering children in Palestine.

⁵ It is believed that this deepfake footage initiated the organization of a failed coup in the state in 2019, given that the representation of Ali Bongo, the President of Gabon, brought confusion among the public and caused the rise of doubt in his ability to rule the country. See Byman et al. 2023.

The use of synthetic content in conflict zones: the Israel/Palestine conflict

Even though synthetic content as a tool for spreading disinformation in conflict zones debuted at the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, faked video footage, audio recordings and photographs showed its full potential within the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Mustafa 2021, 213). In this conflict, the focus was predominantly on creating faked photographs (Klepper 2023).

Upon analysis of the existing synthetic video footage, it is evident that this type of faked material is the rarest and, in case of their appearance, they predominantly imply manipulation and faking audio recording of the original video footage from the present times or the previous few years. Regarding identified faked video footage, we notice that such materials are predominantly being made within the Palestinian propaganda to provoke Israel, inciting fear among the local population, reducing the support to the War Cabinet, and reducing morale and combat effectiveness. The most recent such video, recorded at the time of writing this research, implied the placement of two video footage of the attack on Israel, allegedly conducted by seven states, posted on *TikTok* social network on October 6, 2024, a day before the anniversary of the beginning of the escalated conflict (Zhang and Wang 2024). Upon detailed analysis of the origin of the video footage, we determined that the footage was indeed fake but published sometime earlier and reposted a day before the anniversary to remind the Israeli community of the Hamas attack, intending to spread unrest and confusion among the local population.

On the other hand, the corpus of detected faked audio recordings treating the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is engaged as a tool for discrediting the enemy and declining international support. It is noteworthy that such material is predominantly present in Palestinian propaganda. Namely, Palestine, as the “weaker player” in the conflict, tends to use all existing trump cards and new technologies, such as the generation of synthetic materials, to contribute to the fight and weaken the “stronger” Israel. In this context, the most relevant example of such practice is the video footage with synthesized audio recording, conducted in such a manner to attribute a member of the Israeli Armed

Forces emission of recruitment propaganda towards Ukrainian citizens, promising them citizenship, housing, money and business opportunities (Center on Extremism 2023).

Even at the beginning of the conflict, the generation of faked photographs was identified as “a powerful tool” for disinformation placement (Eisele and Steinwehr 2023), directed towards stressing the Palestinian suffering and strengthening the morale of the Palestinian/Israeli population. Namely, even during the first days of the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the first faked photographs from Palestine appeared in the media, depicting predominantly the suffering of children, given that the bombed targets are deemed an ideal background for the creation of content that intensifies the viewer’s emotions (Eisele and Steinwehr 2023). One such photograph, published only five days after the escalation of the conflict – on October 12, 2023, was intended to use the image of a child abandoned in ruins in Gaza (Khatsenkova 2023) to generate compassion for the suffering of the Palestinian people and was thus identified as one of the earliest synthetic materials which marked this conflict. The propaganda material directed towards strengthening the morale of the Palestinian people from the beginning of the conflict was also fortified with the materials generated via artificial intelligence, within which similar motifs appear – the continuance of family life in the ruins after Israeli bombings but also after imprisonment by Israel (Golshiri 2024), both characteristic for Palestinian propaganda. Besides materials of this character, we have also detected synthetic photographs representing bombing by the Israeli Armed Forces and the presence of Israeli tanks in the ruins, probably created as parts of Israeli propaganda (Eisele and Steinwehr 2023; Klepper 2023).

Upon examination of the presented materials, we can notice that the authors of these propaganda materials are predominantly patriotically oriented civilians who publish synthetic content, especially synthetic photographs, on their private social media accounts; these photographs are also used by journalists (Eisele and Steinwehr 2023). In this way, the social character of such propaganda activity comes to the fore, thus influencing the morale of the local population, the emotions of viewers, and the support of the international community.

However, it is important to stress that, in the first weeks of this conflict, the researchers engaged in the study of disinformation

determined that the number of synthetic contents is limited and that the majority of them is not reliable, thus denouncing their possible impact on the spread of propaganda, at the same time confirming their power to incite strong emotions among viewers. In this context, the researchers stress that the emergence of synthetic materials led to the creation of deflection of certain parts of society who nowadays deem even truthful media content as synthetic, thus shielding themselves from manipulations and the truth (Hsu and Thompson 2023). As a consequence, the conflict participants were presented with a chance to implement the principle of “liar’s dividend”, enabling them to negate the authenticity of a delicate media content of a negative connotation, calling it a synthetic construct, even in cases when it is essentially not fake (Busch and Ware 2023, 4; Hsu and Thompson 2023). This principle can bring doubt into the international community and cause an increasing erosion of trust in the truthfulness of available information about actions in the field.

Obviously, social network users still rely on old footage, montage of visual materials and attribution of old visuals to the ongoing Israel/Palestine conflict (Hsu and Thompson 2023). However, the frequency of the emergence of synthetic content shows that the use of deepfake materials will intensify during this conflict and in the future. Therefore, the Palestinian propaganda machinery, which is the most dominant in this conflict, is currently testing the capabilities of synthetic materials generation tools. This development is leading to the enhancement of techniques and improved content quality. As a result, the quality will take precedence over quantity, further blurring the lines between truth and falsehood.

Paired with other tools offered by analytical AI, such as algorithmic amplification, Natural Language Processing (NLP) and search engine manipulations (see Kazić 2023a), it is possible to construct even more destructive manipulation of narratives present on social media not only by generating fake content but also by selecting the narrative which will be most present and thus dictate the sentiments of the general public opinion on some issues, which enables the creation of a new image of a current, but also the future events in a region.

The use of synthetic content in political crises: the Government Overthrow in Syria

After resisting protests, civil war, terrorist activity and foreign influence for almost fourteen years, the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, the President of the Syrian Republic, happened quickly, initiated by the attack of the *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, lasting from November 27 to December 8, 2024 (Loft and Mills 2024, 10). Al-Assad's resignation and his leaving the country on December 8 put a stop to fifty-four years of the rule of the al-Assad family in Syria, and the space opened for the actions of the divided opposition of rebel character, which is currently ruling the country.

Even though this study analyses the period of only two months, the said event is significant because the first synthetic content regarding this political crisis appeared in such a short period. When speaking of synthetic video footage, not a single faked video footage was recorded in the given timeframe, which does not necessarily mean such material was not created. Still, the first night in Syria without the al-Assad family was characterized by the emergence of a false narrative on the killing of members of the bygone ruling family after Bashar al-Assad's departure, alluding to the alleged killing of a relative of the overthrown President, named Sulaiman Hilal al-Assad, who was hanged on the Latakia square. Regarding this, the Syrian media witnessed the spread of the video footage depicting the public execution by hanging of a male individual in the square, accompanied by the chanting of the assembled crowd. A detailed analysis enabled us to conclude that the footage depicts the hanging of a different individual, named Ammar al-Assad, with no apparent familial relations to the President, as well as that the footage was recorded in a different location in Khirbet Ghazaleh. At the moment of the creation of this study, there were some indications that Sulaiman al-Assad, a relative of Bashar al-Assad, was indeed killed in Latakia (Bahl 2024); however, this information is not confirmed.

The most significant sample of synthetic audio recordings emerged on the night of the fall of the Syrian Government, between December 8 and 9, 2024. The said audio recording, visually identified by a photograph of al-Assad, represents an address of the overthrown President declining his resignation from the duty and transfer of power to the hands of the

People's Assembly President, with the condition that the said individual proclaims a comprehensive national reconciliation and organizes democratic elections within one year (Bahl 2024). Bearing that the departure of Bashar al-Assad from the country was already known, this recording spread throughout social networks the same night and was shared more than 200,000 times (Bahl 2024). However, what spiraled the people into doubting the authenticity of the recording was not the declaration of "capitulation" but the public apology of al-Assad to the Syrian people for the actions of the entire al-Assad family, an order that all foreign forces and militias shall leave the Syrian territory, and the dissolution of all agreements with RF and IR Iran (Bahl 2024), especially bearing in mind the fact that Bashar al-Assad at that moment found refuge exactly in Moscow (Woollacott 2024; Muhammad 2024). Later, we determined that the recording was generated in September 2023 and published on *the YouTube* social platform. However, the damage was already done. The information was shared hundreds of thousands of times, and some users even believed it.

Synthetic photographs of the suffering of the local population have been generated and emitted since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 (Sidharth 2018), especially during the dominance of the Islamic State in the territories of Syria and Iraq (Kajjo 2024), all to current times. The dominant theme changed per the needs and the situation. In this context, since the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, Syrian cyberspace is dominated by both synthetic and real photographs from Sednaya prison, creating confusion and showing the state of recently freed prisoners previously sentenced by the al-Assad family as being worse than it is (Pars Today 2024). The idea behind this campaign is to additionally decline the cult of Bashar al-Assad, showcase his repressive leadership, and also create sympathies for the current Transitional Government generated from the rebel ranks, which ended the suffering of al-Bashar's predominantly political prisoners, at the same time preventing al-Bashar's return as the head of the country. Namely, the photograph that attracted the most attention, depicting a prisoner in this prison, was a synthetic photograph from the period preceding the fall of Bashar al-Assad and has no links to the current situation (Woollacott 2024).

The review of synthetic materials found in the media space after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad points to the fact that such a short

period is insufficient for generating original and new synthetic content. However, there is still enough time to reuse the old materials with a new purpose. Moreover, the presence of adequate materials reaffirms the tendency to create propaganda generated via AI, especially audio recordings and photographs, confirmed by the synthesized address of the overthrown President and the images of political prisoners. Bearing in mind the existence of interests of serious players in the field of information warfare, such as RF and IR Iran (Loft and Mills 2024, 24–29) for the Syrian cyber (but also geographical) space, we can expect an intensification of occurrence of instances of synthetic content which will, given the passage of time and the technological advances, potentially be more credible, more emotional, and thus – more destructive.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Generative Adversarial Networks and their products – deepfake materials made identifying the truth in the sea of information content more difficult. Regarding conflicts and political crises, it highlighted the potential of artificial intelligence to escalate conflicts and crises and blur the line between the truth and the falsehood.

Despite the modality of spreading digital propaganda and disinformation being significantly made more complex with the emergence of AI in these processes, the academic community has not yet identified this segment as a new phase of propaganda activity. By this work, and especially these concluding remarks, I hope to change their stance. Namely, the creation and spread of propaganda significantly simplified with the emergence of the Internet and social networks. However, the creation of propaganda material until the emergence of artificial intelligence remained in the domain of manual production and thus asked for dedication, work, effort, and especially – an idea. The era of synthetic propaganda and the arrival of AI freed creators from this manual work, putting a “finished product” in their hands, created in line with the provided specifications. This does not refer exclusively to content from the deepfake specter, but also to propaganda texts, which can nowadays be created with text generation tools and Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools. Other tools from the AI specter, especially from the machine learning specter, enable hyper-personalization of content, as recorded in the case of Palestine/Israel. Advanced AI tools also offer the possibility of big data analysis for sampling the emotions of the members of a targeted group, thus enabling the identification of social cleavages and the creation of content for additionally escalating a conflict or a political crisis and leading the conflict participants into a stalemate.

After looking at the presented case studies of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, it is evident that the propaganda goals do not change. Such materials are always created for sentiment manipulation, justification of one’s actions and denouncing the enemy’s activities. Still, this character’s general availability of tools, especially those based on deep learning, which accelerates mass production of synthetic content, significantly simplifies

the propaganda activity within a digital space. Employed from conflict to conflict, from crisis to crisis, the analytical artificial intelligence tools, by the principles of machine learning, which ask for constant training of machines to achieve progress, are presenting increasingly better results. Thus, the practice of conducting propaganda with such materials is presenting great success. Therefore, it is only natural – and expected that in the years to come, in the conflicts and political crises of the future, there will be a more versatile and comprehensive use of these new tools of propaganda action.

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