The Syrian Conflict in the New York Times

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The Syrian conflict is probably the most reported upon in history. As some of the videos recorded during the protests had extreme content, YouTube changed its rules to allow them to be uploaded online. When the protests erupted in 2011, only a few international media organisations had correspondents in the country. This situation produced an unusual alliance between the global media and part of the movement of citizen journalists(1) that emerged in the first years of the uprising. Organisations such as CNN and the BBC relied on activists who in many cases risked their lives to produce firsthand content.

The quality of this coverage - especially that undertaken by Western media - is still to be determined, and media scholars have an essential role to play in filling that gap. For anyone interested in the interplay between media narratives and political power, the Syrian conflict is a fertile field for research. After all, the Syrian uprising and civil war involved countless players - both internal and external -, most of them carrying their own political agendas. In the United States, for instance, the political establishment showed some signs of division over how to proceed in the face of the conflict.

The article [*For or Against War*](https://cgscholar.com/bookstore/works/for-or-against-war?category_id=common-ground-publishing) analyses the coverage of the Syrian conflict in the New York Times (NYT). More specifically, it compares the NYT op-ed pages in two periods: the two months covering the beginning of the protests (March–April 2011) and the two months after the expansion of ISIS in Syria and into Iraq (July–August 2014). I used the news framing paradigm to undertake the analysis.

The findings suggest that in both periods, the Times paralleled discourses of the Obama administration and advocated policies similar to those of the US government. Such convergence was not without occasional dissent, mainly expressed in op-ed pieces by politicians conveying different views from those of the administration.

Despite framing the conflict in its outset as a democratic uprising and taking on an anti-Assad standpoint, the New York Times editorial/op-ed pages supported the US administration’s nonconfrontational policy. Among other justifications for doing so, the contributors upheld that policy by describing the anti-Assad movement in sectarian terms.

After the emergence of ISIS, a significant discursive shift occurred. Bashar al-Assad became the lesser evil and avoiding a humanitarian disaster justified intervention against ISIS. The terrorist organisation became a matter of national security; which Assad’s Syria never was. The Times editorial/op-ed pages corroborated this view.

Other topics discussed in the paper are the coverage of the Middle East in Western media, the latest trends in media ownership and how they affect media content, and the representation of foreign policy in media narratives.

The article is open access and can be found [here](https://cgscholar.com/bookstore/works/for-or-against-war?category_id=common-ground-publishing).

1. [Antoun Issa](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP9_Issa_Syrianmedia_web_0.pdf) estimates that in 2016 almost 315 newspapers were in circulation in different parts of the country, the vast majority of which were in opposition to the regime.