A DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN CANADIAN LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE ONLINE NEWS SITES

BY

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ABSTRACT

After the commencement of the Liberal-lead refugee resettlement initiative, Syrian refugees gained a great deal of attention from Canadian media. This is mainly because this issue is seen to have a direct impact on the community. Since media, politics and public opinion are interconnected in ways that could only be revealed through an exhaustive investigation of such issues as the one at hand; this study investigates the representation of social and political actors involved in the Syrian refugee resentment effort with a focus on Syrian refugees in Canadian Liberal and Conservative online news media. This study relies on the utilization of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and framing theory in communication. A total of 375 articles selected from three of the most visited Canadian news sites, namely the *Toronto Star* (Liberal), the *Toronto Sun* and the *National Post* (Conservative) published between the arrival of the first group of refugees in December, 2015 and the first anniversary of the arrival of the last group of refugees in March, 2017. A triangulation of Quantitative Content Analysis and a Discourse Historical Approach-based analysis serve as the base of this research whereby discursive strategies employed by said online sources are examined. Though Canadian press enjoys unequivocal freedom, the findings suggest that it is greatly affected by partisan politics and is in a way directed by the political elite. A distinction was drawn between the depiction of Syrian refugees in Liberal and Conservative news sources. The *Toronto Star* employed discursive strategies to depict Syrian refugees as mainly economically advantageous to the country, and as victims fleeing a civil war. Though they were presented as harmless, their representation was rather one-dimensional. On the other hand, othering and negative representations were more evident in the *Toronto Sun* and *National Post* where they subordinated refugees by depicting them as a burden to both the government and the public and creating a health and security risk. Interestingly, Syrian refugees were also depicted as victims but of government neglect and mismanagement. The findings of this research show that both media –in differing degrees- have reduced Syrian refugees to mere pawns to push for each party's political agenda and validate their claims of success or failure of the refugee resettlement program. The Conservative media was more critical of the government's efforts as compared to its Liberal counterpart. Liberal media depicted a heroic image of the Prime Minster and Liberal Party and applauded their efforts. Whereas, Conservative media did not only accuse the government of being incompetent and mismanaging the program but accused them of intentionally and maliciously misleading the public and not disclosing information about the exact amount spent on the program and their long-term plans to assimilate the Syrian refugees. Regarding the representation of the Canada and the Canadian public, both Liberal and Conservative media presented Canada as a beacon of hope and contrasted its efforts to that of other 'less generous' nations, thus painting a somewhat exaggerated utopian image. Similarly, the Canadian public were depicted as welcoming and eager to help. The contributions of this research are twofold. Firstly, it contributed to the body of knowledge by presenting an in-depth analysis of media discourse on Syrian refugees. Secondly, the synergy between the Content Analysis and the DHA provide valuable insight for future researchers exploring the impact of media representation on both refugees and the Canadian public.

خلاصة البحث

بعد بدء مبادرة إعادة توطين اللاجئين بقيادة الليبراليين، حظي اللاجئون السوريون باهتمام كبير من وسائل الإعلام الكندية. وهذا يرجع أساسًا إلى أن هذه المشكلة لها تأثير مباشر على المجتمع. نظرًا لأن وسائل الإعلام والسياسة والرأي العام مترابطة؛ تبحث هذه الدراسة في تمثيل الجهات الفاعلة الاجتماعية والسياسية المشاركة في جهود الاستياء من اللاجئين السوريين مع التركيز على وسائل الإعلام الإخبارية الليبرالية والمحافظة على الإنترنت في كندا. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على استخدام المنهج التاريخي للخطاب (DHA) ونظرية التأطير في التواصل. تم اختيار 375 مقالًا في ثلاثة من الصحف الالكترونية من المواقع الإخبارية الكندية الأكثر زيارة، وهي تورنتو ستار (ليبرال)، وتورونتو صن، والبريد الوطني (المحافظ). ونشرت هذه المقالات بين وصول أول مجموعة من اللاجئين في ديسمبر 2015 والذكرى السنوية الأولى لوصول 25 ألف لاجئ في مارس 2017. يعد المزج بين تحليل المحتوى الكمي والتحليل القائم على النهج التاريخي للخطاب، بمثابة قاعدة لهذا البحث وإن النتائج تشير إلى أنها تأثرت إلى حد كبير بالسياسة الحزبية، وبصورة موجهة من النخبة السياسية. وأن هناك تمييزًا بين تصوير اللاجئين السوريين في مصادر الأخبار الليبرالية والمحافظة. كان التمثيل السلبي و"الآخر" أكثر وضوحًا في تورنتو صن وناشنال بوست حيث قاموا بتصوير اللاجئين على أنهم عبء على كل من الحكومة والجمهور وخلق مخاطر صحية وأمنية. ومن المثير للاهتمام، أن اللاجئين السوريين صوروا أيضًا بوصفهم ضحايا لإهمال الحكومة وسوء إدارتها. تظهر نتائج هذا البحث أن كلا وسيلتي الإعلام - بدرجات متفاوتة - قد حولتا اللاجئين السوريين إلى مجرد بيادق للضغط من أجل أجندة سياسية لكل طرف، والتحقق من صحة مزاعم نجاح أو فشل برنامج إعادة توطين اللاجئين. عندما يتعلق الأمر بتمثيل الحكومة الرائدة وبرنامج إعادة التوطين، كانت وسائل الإعلام المحافظة أكثر انتقادًا لجهود الحكومة مقارنة بنظيرتها الليبرالية. وصفت وسائل الإعلام الليبرالية صورة بطولية لرئيس الوزراء والحزب الليبرالي وأشادت بجهودهم. وحيث أن وسائل الإعلام المحافظة لم تتهم الحكومة فقط بعدم الكفاءة وسوء إدارة البرنامج، ولكنها اتهمتهم بتضليل الجمهور عن قصد، وعدم الكشف عن معلومات حول المبلغ الدقيق، الذي ينفق على البرنامج وخططهم الطويلة الأجل، لاستيعاب اللاجئين السوريين. فيما يتعلق بتمثيل كندا والجمهور الكندي، قدمت وسائل الإعلام الليبرالية والمحافظة كندا على أنها منارة للأمل وناقشت جهودها مع جهود الدول الأخرى "الأقل سخاء"، وبالتالي رسم صورة طوباوية مبالغ فيها إلى حد ما. وبالمثل، تم تصوير الجمهور الكندي على أنه مرحب وحريص على المساعدة. مساهمات هذا البحث ذات شقين. أولاً، ساهم في تكوين المعرفة من خلال تقديم تحليل متعمق للخطاب الإعلامي حول اللاجئين السوريين. ثانياً، يوفر التآزر بين تحليل المحتوى وإدارة الشؤون الإنسانية رؤية قيمة للباحثين في المستقبل، لاستكشاف تأثير تمثيل وسائل الإعلام على كل من اللاجئين والجمهور الكندي.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has a history of political instability, civil wars and interstate conflicts that span many decades (Tucker et al., 2010; Hinchcliffe and Milton-Edwards, 2007). When authoritarian regimes are commonplace and civilians live in constant fear, poverty and lack of basic services and infrastructure, it is only a matter of time until protests breakout and people demand change (Jones, 2012). Sure enough, at the end of 2010, a Tunisian fruit seller set himself on fire in protest of the constant harassment and abuse by the police. This triggered a massive reaction throughout the Middle East and tens of thousands of people began protesting in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Protestors called for government reforms, but their demands fell on deaf ears.

Syria was one of the most negatively affected countries in the region. In a matter of a few months, the Assad government began 'silencing' peaceful protestors, demolishing opposition villages, and bombarding towns. This prompted groups -backed by foreign and local stakeholders- to take up arms, further aggravating matters which quickly escalated into a civil war. At these unstable and dangerous times, many Syrians sought refuge in safer regions of the country. Some even escaped the chaotic situation in their homeland and travelled thousands of miles to other countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Germany, Austria (Connor, 2018). Reports from the United Nations estimate 6.1 million internally displaced Syrians and 5.6 million Syrian refugees around the world, prompting the UN rights chief to call the Syrian issue "the worst man-made disaster since World War II" (UN News, 2017).

Discourse focusing on the issue of Syrian refugees has, therefore, become very prominent in both Western politics and media. It is very rare to find a leader of a Western state who is not involved in the conversation on the 'Syrian refugee crises'. Chancellor Merkel, Prime Ministers Cameron and Trudeau, and president Trump regularly involve themselves and respective parties in the conversation and have taken certain steps and set different policies to deal with arriving and perspective refugees (Diab, 2017; Ferris, & Kirişci, 2016).

Consequently, this has reflected on the media to a point where one is able to find multiple articles focusing on Syrian refugees published daily. These articles and news stories range from depicting refugees as people in need of aid and protection, people in detention, a threat to national borders and national security and economic migrants purchasing real-estate. Additionally, news stories covering communities welcoming refugees into their homes and students decorating the school and donating toys and stationery to make their peers feel more at home are also seen in many news outlets (Dauvergne, 2016).

Consequently, some important questions are raised; are these refugees well accepted by the local community? Several studies suggest that refugees find it difficult to assimilate and adapt to Western societies due to the fact that they are looked at negatively and discriminated against at both personal and institutional levels (Hainmueller, Hangartner, & Lawrence, 2016; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008; Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002). What exactly prompted the locals to have a negative perception of these refugees? Could this be the work of the media? Marfleet (2006) claims that "since the 1990s, dominant discourses around refugees included the normalization of a growing hostility towards asylum seekers" (p. 277). To what extent is this true?

As CDA attempts to uncover the discursive means of social influence and takes the oppositional stance against the powerful and the elites, its utilization in this research is of paramount importance. Van Dijk (1995) points out that CDA is accepted as a common approach to study language, discourse, and communication. Moreover, the CDA approach is used as "an attempt to uncover, reveal or disclose what is implicit, hidden or otherwise not immediately obvious in relations of discursively enacted dominance or their underlying ideologies" (van Dijk, 1995: 18).

Syrian refugees have recently gained a great deal of attention from Canadian media. This is mainly because this issue is seen to have a direct impact on their host community. Since media, politics and public opinion are interconnected in ways that could only be revealed through an investigation of such sensitive issues like the one at hand; this study aims to investigate the representation of Syrian refugees and social and political actors involved in the Syrian resettlement program in Canadian online media. By comparing the language of media sites in a country with a history of conflicting positions on refugee reception, one can produce evidence on the impact of media portrayal on the acceptance of refugees.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The political climate in Syria has always been volatile. Therefore, in order to begin to fathom the reasons behind the revolution and the brutal reaction of the Syrian government, one must first explore the roots of the Ba'ath regime (the dictatorship in power since 1947). The Ba'ath party, founded by Michel Aflaq, embodied the spirit of Arab nationalism. The party's early slogan "unity, freedom, socialism" appealed to a

generation of Arabs who wanted to create a nation whose economy is independent of Western support.

The party quickly gained support and power, however, the decade that followed saw a split in the priorities of the civilian and military Ba'athists, this, in turn, widened the ravine between these two groups within the party. In 1963, Hafez al-Assad was among a group of Ba'ath supporters in the Syrian army who organized a coup and seized power. Soon after, Hafez al-Assad –the minister of defence at the time- launched his own coup in 1969, and declared himself as Prime Minister. A year later, with the armed forces at his side, he began his 30-year reign as president of Syria until his death in 2000 (BBC News, 2012; McHugo, 2014).

As stated in a report published in the BBC News (2012), the Ba'ath party granted itself the status of "leader of the state and society" in 1973, this meant that the party would have the right to be involved in all areas of public life. Directives were issued from the central government to regional representatives which made it obligatory for the masses to participate in political activities, the party was also involved in all aspects of civilian lives ranging from controlling unions to incorporating their ideology into school curriculums. Furthermore, citizens did not get promotions and thus climb the corporate ladder if they were not officially members of the Ba'ath party as most posts in the public sector –and in some cases- the private sector were reserved exclusively for Ba'athists.

Lefevre (2013) adds that the only political party that was allowed to remain active was the National Progressive Front, which submitted to the authority of the Ba'ath Party, therefore, the Ba'ath party stood unchallenged until the late 1970's when an Islamic revolution took place as a reaction to the constant repression and torture of Islamists. The short-lived revolution was brutally silenced in 1982 where throughout

the month of February, Ba'ath forces shelled the city of Hama (the heart of the Islamist rebellion). The aftermath culminated with 25,000 to 40,000 casualties.

Two decades of relative quiet later, Bashar al-Assad, son of Hafez al-Assad became president. As a man in the medical profession, Bashar al-Assad sought to present himself as a reformer. He talked about "revitalizing" the party, emending the rigid constitution, and allowing other political parties to participate in the country's affairs, however, his many promises were never met.

As unrest and discontent served as a catalyst for the protests that broke out in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, etc., the political climate in Syria was not very different from the rest of the region. Following in the footsteps of their neighbours, Syrians began peaceful demonstrations in March of 2011. However, unlike Egypt, the Syrian government retaliated with a violent crackdown. Robinson (2012) reports that army tanks entered the cities of Deraa, Banyas, and Homs and besieged the town of Jisr al-Shughour, the violence culminated in the death of around 25,000 civilians in the first year and a half. Though at the beginning of the conflict several government officials left the Ba'ath party in protest to the violent reaction of the government towards protesting civilians, the party's main leadership bodies continued to pledge their loyalty to Bashar al-Assad. As a result, officials in the Ba'ath party lead privileged lives and remained unaffected by the surrounding violence (McHugo, 2014, 2015).

The events that ensued lead to the creation of a rebel 'army', which was soon strengthened by army defectors and given the name "Free Syrian Army" (henceforth FSA). Since the creation of the FSA, divisions between fighters from different ethnic and religious backgrounds have given rise to other militias further complicating the situation. In addition to the local entities involved in the conflict, foreign powers have also involved themselves with support either given to pro-regime or pro-opposition

groups. This placed the country in a devastating condition as “violence, large-scale displacement, sectarianism, radicalisation, territorial fragmentation, and the collapse of critical infrastructure” have plagued the war-torn country for more than half a decade (ARK Group DMCC, 2016: 8).

1.2.1 Estimated Casualties, Overall Losses, and International Effort

Due to the complexity of the situation, the large number of entities involved in the crisis and the belligerence of both the Ba’ath regime and opposition, estimates indicate that over 250,000 people were killed after the onset of the civil war (Amnesty International, 2016), however, other reports (Issa, 2016) show greater numbers (i.e. 470,000 deaths). In 2016 alone, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (2017) reported 16,913 civilian deaths caused chiefly by forces loyal to the Assad regime and Russia. The Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (2018) reported that between 2011 and the beginning of 2018, 188,026 lives were lost to varying perpetrators ranging from the Syrian government, Russian forces and ISIS.

As for other individuals affected by the crisis, a report published by the UNHCR estimated that more than 7.9 million civilians are internally displaced in Syria and more than 4 million are living outside the country. It is important to mention that out of the 400,000 civilians who have travelled to Europe to seek asylum, around 73% are women and children (UNHCR, 2015).

Many nations extended a helping hand to Syrian refugees including neighbouring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Most recent statistics show that Turkey has the highest refugee acceptance rate with 2.7 million refugees followed by Lebanon at 1.1 million, Jordan at 629,000 and Iraq at 249,000. Having said that,

most of the refugees who have settled in the Middle East hope to continue their journey to Europe, Canada and the U.S. (UNHCR, 2015). Over at the EU countries, 87,900 new applications were received in only 2016, 81% of which were registered in Germany (Eurostat, 2016). The United States and Canada also planned to take in Syrian refugees, however, the November 2015 Paris attacks halted US efforts (Shulman, 2016).

Canada's then Conservative government committed to admitting 10,000 Syrian refugees from religious minorities by 2018. This plan was met with delays due to what the government referred to as security concerns. However, after the death of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old boy whose family had planned to seek refuge in Canada, the Liberal party quickly introduced its plan of taking in 25,000 refugees by the year's end if they were to win in the elections, this plan was successfully executed in February 2016 (The Government of Canada, 2016a).

The Canadian government has a long history of resettling refugees from around the world. Depending on the party in power and the political climate during the said period, the government was at times, apprehensive towards accepting refugees (Bradimore & Bauder, 2011; Hier & Greenberg, 2002), and at others, quickly came to their aid (Beaudoin, Danch, & Rehaag, 2015; Hagan, 2001; Powell, 2005). In the case of the Syrian refugees, the Canadian government has exerted reasonable efforts into transporting and resettling displaced individuals.

Although Canada prides itself on its humanitarian values of compassion and fairness, it is important to point out that the government has a few things to gain from bringing in Syrian refugees. Canada is facing low population growth, meaning its workforce is aging at a rapid rate and business leaders are unable to keep up with the demands of the market. Batherson, chair of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce, proclaimed that they "need new, younger people to come into the economy to

contribute, to set up businesses, employ other Nova Scotians and expand our tax base rather than manage with a shrinking tax base" (Tencer, 2015). Additionally, the government will not be financially assisting a large number of these refugees (i.e. 11,000) because they are privately sponsored (The Economist, 2016). Having said that, whatever the intentions of the Canadian government are, one is unable to deny its positive involvement in Syrian humanitarian aid process.

Regardless of the government's positive response, on the national level, polls show that Canadians hold somewhat divided views on the degree of Canada's involvement in the Syrian refugee crisis. Fifty two percent supported the government's plan to resettle the 25,000 Syrian refugees while 44% opposed the program. The polls also show that 42% of respondents want Canada to stop taking in Syrian refugees, while 29% said Canada should stop at 25,000 and only 29% agreed that the country should accept even more. This division also reflects regional political affiliations, whereby, Atlantic Canada, a predominantly Liberal province has the highest support percentage at 60%. Alberta (primarily Conservative) has the lowest percentage of support at 41% (Angus Reid Institute, 2015).

Canadian media outlets have remained diligent in covering news relating to Syrian refugees settling in Canada. Though a positive representation of the refugees would in a way help the Liberal Canadian government in convincing the reluctant public to extend a welcoming hand to the newcomers, conservative media might have a different portrayal of these individuals. The representation of Syrian refugees in Canadian media would affect how Canadians perceive and therefore respond to Syrian refugees. The analysis of news produced by Liberal and Conservative media provides an opportunity to have an understanding of discursive practices influencing decisions and actions.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

With the deterioration of the situation in war-torn Syria, approximately 4.2 million refugees had fled the war-torn country by the end of 2015 (UNHCR, 2015). As tens of thousands of displaced people moved westward, Canada began assessing the refugees' potential impact on the country's security and economic stability. Parties within the Canadian government had different plans as to which and how many Syrian refugees they intended to admit. The Conservative Party announced that they would resettle ten thousand refugees by September 2016, whereas the Liberals proposed taking in 25,000 refugees by the end of 2015 (CBC News, 2015). The latter plan was eventually implemented after the Liberal Party won the 2015 federal elections (The Government of Canada, 2016c).

Although many Canadian citizens and private institutions rushed to apply to become private sponsors, this decision was not welcomed by all of the Canadian public. Polls showed that only half of the population were in agreement with the government's decision, and this number further decreased in Conservative Party provinces such as Saskatchewan (Angus Reid Institute, 2015). Interestingly, the highest opposition came from Alberta, which was governed by the New Democratic Party (NDP), which did not share the Conservative Party's ideological stance but supported the party's plan to resettle only 10,000 Syrian refugees (Canada Immigration Newsletter, 2015).

Canadian politicians also had varied opinions; the Conservative Party cited financial, resource and security concerns when proposing that only a small number of refugees be granted entry, while Liberals argued that although they aim to admit Syrian refugees for humanitarian reasons, refugees would revive the stagnating labour force and rejuvenate the aging community (Hussen, 2018). Regardless of the government's

or the opposition's opinions, what makes this situation unique is that unlike its European neighbors, due to its geographical location, Canada had the opportunity to debate exactly how many Syrian refugees to resettle, vet the refugees beforehand and transport them once they were given the all-clear. Thus, after making the decision to resettle 25,000 refugees, one would not expect the Canadian media to have a reaction similar to their European counterparts.

News centering on the arrival of Syrian refugees and the possible implications increased in the following months. These news articles played an important role in perpetuating a certain image of Syrian refugees and shaping public opinion; this was especially true in the Canadian context, as Canadians believe that the news they consume is objective and presents both sides of the story (Mitchell, Simmons, Masta & Silver, 2018).

Williamson (2012) argues that "[news media's] implicit bias […] is shrouded by the façade of objectivity" (p. 384). Major news agencies such as Torstar (the publisher of the *Toronto Star*) and Postmedia (the publisher or the *Toronto Sun*) have strong links to and have endorsed policies proposed by the Liberal and Conservative parties, respectively (Edejer, 2014; Bradburn, 2015). Consequently, realities of events can be decontextualized by different editorials to represent institutional voices (Fowler, 1991). Specifically, regarding immigration and refugee media discourse, Bauder (2008b) argues that "[negative] media representations affect attitudes towards migrants, create anxieties and fears, rally support for and against immigration, and legitimate immigration laws" (p.290).

As the world stands divided on this issue, news media will most certainly play a defining role and have far-reaching implications for the representation of Syrian refugees to the Canadian public as well as for the refugees themselves. Even at the