

## **American Spring: How Russian State Media Translate American Protests for an Arab Audience**

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Media coverage of protests following the murder of George Floyd on May 26, 2020, tended to ascribe to the demonstrations two faces: One, presented by organizers and supporters, was a decentralized movement for peaceful change; the other was a violent conspiracy for the disruption of order. Good analysis has flowed into the question of domestic media bias in the coverage of Summer 2020's historical events. Less attention, however, has been directed to the ways foreign media covered the protests. One of the most powerful voices in framing the story of the protests to a global audience was Russia's state-sponsored media behemoth RT. And nowhere was RT's particular take on the demonstrations more pronounced than its Arabic-language broadcast RT Arabic or RT3. Through the lens of discourse analysis, I focus on a small sample of quintessential reports to explore how RT3 covered Summer 2020's momentous events, what their reporting tells us about Kremlin disinformation strategies, and how RT3's coverage of the protests factors into the Kremlin's greater geopolitical agenda vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa.

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News media coverage of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, with some notable exceptions (Elmasry & el-Nawawy, 2017), has tended to reflect well-known patterns in reporting on social protests. Several recent studies have shown how "racialization" and the dramatization of clashing between protesters and police (Leopold & Bell, 2017, p. 732) reinforce McLeod and Hertog's (1992) notion of a "protest paradigm," with outlets placing emphasis on the behavior of outlying individuals, unusual incidents, and the perspective of officials rather than protesters on the ground (p. 260). Kilgo and Mourão (2019) argue that the long arc of the BLM movement, beginning with the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, and extending through the present day, have been regularly marginalized in mainstream media, allowing the movement's core message of antipolice brutality to become easily manipulated along partisan lines (p. 4287). This does not imply that BLM protests have not garnered enormous attention in the media. Rather, coverage of the movement had tended to

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ebb and flow with major spikes in volume during the summers of 2016 and 2020 (Meta, 2020), two periods in which partisan activity, in advance of the U.S. presidential elections, was at a fever pitch.

The concentration in reporting on BLM protests over the summers of 2016 and 2020 is doubly significant because BLM has also been a major target of disinformation operations seeking to influence the course of American politics. As I discuss in the final section of this article, new research, including that commissioned by the U.S. Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence following the 2016 presidential elections, has begun to shed light on the use of social media platforms as major disseminators of disinformation surrounding BLM. But the international scope of these operations as well as the role of traditional and state-run media in the Kremlin's greater geopolitical strategy remain less well understood.

### Mediating BLM

In the following, I look at one branch of the Russian state news behemoth RT to examine how the (mis)translation and dissemination of mainstream reporting on BLM was deployed against a broader wave of protest activity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). RT Arabic (RT3) was hardly the only international news outlet to cover the 2020 protests. The phrase *hayat al-soud mohema* (Black Lives Matter) became inextricable from the ecosystem of the news media in Arabic such that by Fall 2020, the three most dominant websites associated with the phrase, after Wikipedia, were all news media outlets (see Alexa, 2021b).<sup>2</sup> Prominent columnists and pundits expanded on events breathlessly and major state-run organizations, from the Emirati-based Sky News Arabia to the Saudi-backed Al-Arabiya, Turkey's multilingual Anadolu, or Qatar's Al-Jazeera, staked a place in the global conversation. As noted by the BBC, a number of prominent writers in the Arabic media sphere concentrated on the ostensible "divisions" (*inqisam*) in American society made vivid by the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed (BBC, 2020, para. 3). Al-Jazeera's chief Washington correspondent Mohammad Elmenhawwy remarked, in a similar vein, that many Arabic news producers were eager to replay scenes of chaos as they unfolded in the streets of the world's mighty bastion of democracy (M. Elmenhawwy, personal communication, November 5, 2020). For a number of writers in the region's network of state news organizations, the protests became a platform for denouncing America's perceived role in fostering demonstrations abroad or the ostensible hypocrisy of its support for human rights in light of Floyd's killing (al-Nashar, 2020). Still others, like Ilyas Kharfoush, writing for the London-based *Al-Sherq al-Awsat*, took note of such "opportunism" (*al-intihaziya*), reading the critical tone of coverage emanating from places like China, Iran, and Russia as an attempt to deflect attention from unrest at home (Kharfoush, 2020, para. 15).

In general terms, RT's coverage of the Summer 2020 protests could be described as having reflected this latter trend. Its depiction of police violence and chaotic protests provided a useful foil to Russia's own record of human rights abuse. Yet, as a broad canvas, with myriad points of perspective, its coverage can

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<sup>2</sup> Alexa Analytics uses the term "keyword share of voice" to describe website traffic as it relates to a "specific exact match keyword" (Alexa, 2021a, para. 10). RT Arabic, although not among the 10 most trafficked sites receiving hits for the phrase *hayat al-soud mohema* (Black Lives Matter), received the most share of voice among news sites, third overall (after Wikipedia and Booking.com), for the word *Portland*, in Arabic, and the fourth largest share of voice for the keyword *Antifa* (see Alexa, 2021c).

hardly be described as uniform. Rather, as I argue, RT's coverage of BLM protest activity—crystallized in the 10-part documentary series *Black Lives* (see Figure 2), which I discuss in the final section of this article—functioned more in a strategic than tactical fashion with the long arc of reporting mirroring core elements of the Kremlin's geopolitical posture toward social movements around the globe, the MENA first and foremost. This is not to suggest that RT reporting on U.S. protests functioned in a manner auxiliary to its objectives in the MENA, but rather that the narrative underpinning RT reporting on U.S. and Arab social movements is best understood in relation to a common "antagonistic frontier," to quote Ernesto Laclau (2005): a recognition that although the "ontic" reality of the proverbial "crowd" (p. 83) may exist in a specific geographical location, its "ontological" value, particularly in the digital age, can apply well beyond the site of origin (p. 87).

Chantal Mouffe (2013) articulates this notion vividly in her work *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* where she writes:

the transformation of political identities can never result from a rationalist appeal to the true interest of the subject, but rather from the inscription of the social agent in a set of practices that will mobilize its affects in a way that disarticulates the framework in which the dominant process takes place. (p. 93)

The type of discourse analysis I advance here aspires to complement the work of Laclau and Mouffe, the so-called Essex School, insofar as the subject concerns a "popular" movement rendered in antagonistic terms (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, Kioupiolis, & Siomos, 2017, p. 425). In seeking to discern how RT and others mobilize the "affects" of BLM beyond its dominant frame (Mouffe, 2013, p. 93), my reading of the media diverts from quantitative methods of content analysis as it posits that the ontological value of protest mediatization gains clarity especially, if not exclusively, when examined through a comparative and aesthetic lens. This mode of discourse analysis has gained currency of late with the study of right-wing populism and the myriad nationalist movements now gripping much of the industrialized world (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). RT reporting on BLM as well as multiple concurrent social movements in the MENA—Libya and Sudan providing my case in point—offers an appropriate canvas for the discernment of the Kremlin's "dichotomic separation of identities into 'us' and 'them'" (Tipaldou & Casula, 2019, p. 352) and of its evolving contribution to such ideological formations within the MENA region and beyond.

### **RT Arabic (RT3)**

The second foreign-language broadcast after English to be created as part of RT's multilingual bouquet of channels, RT Arabic's rise in the MENA has been steady and aggressive. Whereas Al-Jazeera and the U.S. government's Arabic-language broadcast Al-Hurra transmit across five satellite stations, RT3 is on eight, including in war-torn Yemen. No Arabic-language news network works free of state interests, but RT3, which is currently overseen by Margarita Simonyan who also runs the English flagship, is markedly naked in its slant. Alberto Fernandez, the former president of the State Department's Middle East Broadcasting Network, which conducted a massive survey of Arabic media consumption as part of a reboot of U.S. government-backed media in the region in 2018, suggested that RT's unabashedly ideological reporting was likely part of the reason for its rapid success. That and its look: As part of the Middle East Broadcasting Network overhaul, Fernandez said he even had Al-Hurra's Springfield, Virginia, studio redesigned to

resemble the “edginess and look” of RT3 by employing a new cast of young anchors and an aesthetic modeled on RT3 (A. Fernandez, personal communication, November 11, 2020).

In addition to the satellite broadcasts, Russian state media in Arabic, including RT, Sputnik, and a host of extraofficial news and aggregator sites, are highly visible in the realm of online news. In July 2020, according to Alexa Analytics, which ranks websites comparatively and based on a site’s total number of visits (Prantl & Prantl, 2018), RT3 was the second highest ranked news site in the Arab Middle East. In Egypt, the largest country in the region, RT3’s website ranked slightly ahead of the website of the Emirati-based Sky News Arabia and trailed only the viral news outlet Youm 7, an Egyptian site that is closely aligned with the government and dominates Internet news traffic throughout the region but frequently reposts material from RT. In Summer 2020, Al-Jazeera.net, once the leader in the Arab world, trailed RT3 online in every Arab country but Algeria. This trend followed RT’s already heavy presence on the world’s most visited Internet site, YouTube (Ortung & Nelson, 2019, p. 82): The station became the first channel to reach 1 billion views in 2013, and by Fall 2020 could boast more than 10 billion views (Bidder, 2013). RT3, which launched its YouTube channel in 2008, has the highest number of dedicated subscribers (5.11 million) of all of the RT subsidiaries, including RT Español (4.33 million) and RT English (4.07 million). Of the major Arabic-language news stations, including Al-Arabiya, Sky News, BBC Arabic, Al-Jazeera, and France 24, RT Arabic’s number of subscribers trails only BBC Arabic (7.47 million) and Al-Jazeera (7.7 million), both of which started on YouTube before RT3, in 2005 and 2007, respectively.

Critics have long held that RT inflates its popularity and uses bots and trolls to boost its online presence (Helmus et al., 2019; Zavadsky, 2015), and the stories driving the most traffic could be characterized largely as fluff (Zavadsky, 2015). Still, the breadth and infrastructure of RT in general and RT3 in particular allow the organization to capitalize on moments of historical gravity. Al-Jazeera may have helped create a politically significant “regional public sphere” (Lynch, 2012, para. 6), but media communications are “ideologically plastic.” As Salazar (2017) writes, there is no “inherently democratic destiny” (p. 87) to the use of communications technology in the construction and dissemination of information. The “terrain of transition” is particularly ripe for manipulation (Gyárfášová, Krekó, Mesežnikov, Molnár, & Morris, 2013, p. 4). In this respect, RT3 appears designed to meet the moment.

On one level, Russian state news media including RT and Sputnik provide coverage of events like any other large news organization. Most of their reporting concerns Russian interests and the role of Russia in the world (Dajani, Gillespie, & Crilley, 2019, p. 2). But as is the case with RT’s reporting in Europe, Latin America, and the United States, RT3 also maintains an agenda that frequently demonizes democratic activism while lionizing Russia’s role in combating terrorism and promoting security (Husayn, 2019, p. 345).

The centrality of Arabic to the RT mission parallels in many respects the Kremlin’s renewed investment and growing military footprint in the region (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Rumer, 2019). The station’s presence in the United States, in contrast, is more muted. By Summer 2018, most of RT’s broadcasting frequencies in the United States, which had limited viewership to begin with (Erickson, 2017), were shut down following a directive by the Justice Department that the station registers as a “foreign agent” (Finley & Heintz, 2019, para. 3). RT’s YouTube channels carry the designation, implemented by Google since 2018, of being funded by the Russian government. But as reports by ProPublica and Reuters found, by Summer 2020 dozens of Kremlin-

backed channels on YouTube remained without designation and some of those, including at least 14 that traffic in disinformation, were "generating billions of views and millions of dollars in advertising revenue" (Dave & Bing, 2019, para. 1). Russian-backed media have also fed the American mainstream in clandestine ways.

### Ricochet Rhetoric

Witness Utah where, on June 30, 2020, a small group of purported BLM protesters stood across the street from armed counterprotesters for an event in Provo. Sometime in the late afternoon, an SUV drove slowly through the crowd on the protesters' side of the street. A White male wearing a mask approached the vehicle, suddenly firing two rounds through the passenger-side window and prompting the car to speed away (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. "'Black Lives Matter' demonstrators shoot at a car" (RT Arabic, 2020b).**

The following morning, at 3:26, a Twitter account associated with the online website Deseret posted footage of the incident with a description of the shooter as a BLM "protester/rioter" (Prophecy, 2020). Later that day, at 5:26 p.m., RT posted the Deseret tweet on its Tweet Deck and quickly thereafter produced a microstory highlighting the group's Twitter feed (RT, 2020a). The video posted by Deseret appeared to arrive first on RT Arabic's YouTube channel, which, along with an ocean of auxiliary websites, rocketed the post into viral orbit before finally arriving at primetime, on July 2, on Fox News' Tucker Carlson show. Mystery surrounded the motivations of the alleged assailant and the origins of the protest and counterprotest (a local news outlet in Provo reported that the protest had not been organized by Black Lives Matter Utah; Crombleholme, 2020), but the scene, which worked to invert the weaponization of vehicles as an act of domestic terrorism by framing the driver as a victim, was compelling enough to fuel the far-right trope of "violent criminals being used as a militia by the Democratic Party to seize power" (Schwartz, 2020, para. 2). It just needed a viral boost from RT. A similar dynamic unfolded in Portland, Oregon, just a month later when, on August 1, a group of protesters set fire to the American flag using a Bible. RT's video unit Ruptly filmed the incident and disseminated it through social media, where it was eventually picked up by Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump, Jr., who tweeted the video as proof of the protesters' belligerence. RT vigorously refuted a report in *The New York Times* (Rosenberg & Barnes, 2020) that described the video

and its viral spread as an example of “disinformation,” noting that the footage was unaltered and the story’s title “‘Peaceful’ Portland Protesters Burn Bible & Flag, 24 Hours After Torching Pig’s Head in Cop Hat” was “merely a straightforward description of the video’s contents” (RT, 2020c, para. 9). Whereas the English-language article described an ambiguous number of “protesters” setting fire to “bibles” and “flags” (RT, 2020b, para. 1), the Arabic-language rerun of the story explicitly claimed that demonstrators had burned “dozens of copies of the Bible and the American flag” and that they had done so out of anger that “Christ was White” (RT Arabic, 2020e, para. 2). For RT’s global audience, including notably in the MENA region, such reporting was intended to bolster existing bias that democratic activism serves as a cover for organized chaos. As one commentator remarked on the Deseret footage posted on RT3’s YouTube channel, “This is how the so-called Arab Spring began with self-declared demonstrators calling for freedom before they begin shooting civilians and police officers” (RT Arabic, 2020b).

### **Replicate Rhetoric**

Counterrevolutionary coverage of the BLM movement helped to reinforce RT messaging surrounding protest movements throughout the MENA. Extending back as far as the opening week of protest in Egypt, in 2011 (see Greenberg, 2019b), and with increased intensity over the past three years, Russian state media, including RT, Sputnik, and a host of parallel outfits, have worked to bolster narratives of securitization, nationalism, and anti-Islamism in the MENA while demonizing prodemocracy movements and pushing back against the perceived meddling of the U.S. government, Silicon Valley, and multinational nongovernmental organizations like George Soro’s Open Society Foundation. The pattern, which began in the early days of the Arab Spring, reaching a crescendo amid the Syrian Civil War, had become by Summer 2020 a near constant feature of RT3 reporting.

In Libya, for example, where Russian-backed mercenaries were throwing their weight behind Khalifa Hifter (also spelled Haftar), a former commander under al-Qadhafi and the self-styled leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA) that splintered from the Islamist-led government in Tripoli in 2014, a robust social media campaign worked to demonize the UN-backed government in Tripoli as state sponsors of terrorism while amplifying the LNA’s rhetoric of law and order. RT3, along with other major Arabic-language news outlets, such as the Saudi state news giant Al-Arabiya and the Egyptian site Youm 7, moved quickly to counter the narrative—advanced by Al-Jazeera as well as several prominent Western news outlets—that Hifter was a renegade warlord who aspired to become “Libya’s next dictator” (“Saudi Arabia’s Reckless Prince,” 2019, para. 1). As was observed during the events of the BLM protests in the United States, Russian-backed media operations functioned primarily as news in the sense that they were timed to correspond with major events on the ground. In Libya, this strategy became vividly apparent amid the LNA’s assault on Tripoli in April 2019. Examining a 15-day period during the launch of the LNA’s assault on Tripoli, researchers with the Centro Studi Internazionali in Rome found that Arabic.RT.com had more than 263,000 “interactions” drawn from material related to LNA leader Khalifa Hifter (Centro Studi Internazionali, 2019, p. 13). For information pertaining to Hifter, in April 2019, RT trailed only YouTube, itself a major platform for RT, in terms of the online domains most commonly shared across Twitter messaging (Centro Studi Internazionali, 2019). Equally notable, the Centro Studi Internazionali found a pattern of “interconnected” and “automated informative blogs” strategically coordinated to saturate the media environment with news pertaining to Khalifa Hifter (Centro Studi Internazionali, 2019, p. 14). This strategy was also detected by Facebook

(2019), which later attributed a significant amount of the coordinated inauthentic behavior to bots operated from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—all partners with Russia in the conflict in Libya.

Similarly, in Sudan, a country described by Russia's chairman for the Committee of International Affairs for the State Duma as occupying "the most important geographical position on the African continent and in the Arab world" ("Russian Lawmakers," 2019, para. 9) and where Russian companies like Mir Gold and Kush maintain large gold mining operations (Sputnik Arabic, 2019, 9:04–9:10), a similar disinformation front opened in response to the mass popular uprising against the dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir in early 2019. There, Russian state media along with Egyptian and Gulf-based media operators highlighted the usurpation of power by the military-led transitional council as well al-Bashir's infamous Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary organization frequently denounced by international human rights organizations for its role in the Darfur crisis and as a victory over the "project of the Brotherhood" and "a blow to the regional projects of Doha, Ankara, and Tehran" (RT Arabic, 2019b, para. 4). RT3, as well as Sputnik and RIA Novosti, lionized the leader of the Rapid Support Forces, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemetti"), and amplified regime organs like the Sudanese News Agency by reposting their reports and driving traffic to their social media accounts (see, e.g., RT Arabic, 2019a).

### **Strategic Mistranslation and Source Laundering**

The tactical methods used to deploy Kremlin-backed disinformation, mistranslation, and source laundering—a method of channeling strategic narratives through alternative sources—appear endemic to RT3's reporting. News translation in general has long been understood to function in a mode of "nonequivalence" in the sense that editors and journalists regularly repurpose source text in order to reach their target audience (Chovanec, 2019, p. 133). But even a minimal sample of RT3 translations shows that rather than simply mediating foreign-sourced content, mistranslated articles published by RT3 fit a common strategic pattern, namely, the amplification of divisive language and the elision or alteration of language pertinent to Russian interests. Mistranslation speaks to just one of the 20-plus techniques identified by the Center for European Policy Analysis for the U.S. Committee on Foreign Relations' minority staff report on Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. elections (United States, 2018). The "altering" of "quotation, source, or context," as understood by the Center for European Policy Analysis, applies largely to the dissemination of "facts and statements reported from other sources" in a fashion that is "different from the original" (United States, 2018, p. 197). The scenario for this kind of disinformation technique is when a statement is "attributed to a different person than who actually said it or a quote is placed out of context to change its meaning" (United States, 2018, p. 197). Such alterations do occur within RT3. However, the channel also supplements translated material with strategically biased points of narrative.

For example, on October 5, 2019, several international news agencies published in Arabic an article from Agence France-Presse concerning the Berlin conference on the conflict in Libya. Of the three largest news agencies to publish the Agence France-Presse article, including France 24 (Agence France-Presse, 2020a), Swissinfo (Agence France-Presse, 2020b), and RT3 (Agence France-Presse, 2020c), RT3 alone published a heavily manipulated version eliding ostensibly minor details such as a description of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord as being "UN recognized" as well as more substantive information including a lengthy discussion on a UN-backed arms embargo (Agence France-Presse, 2020a, para. 4). On

October 11, 2020, RT3 published a translation of a CNN article titled "Turkey's Combative Foreign Policy Could Soon Reach a Dead End" (Qiblawi, 2020). RT3's translation, which appeared less than 24 hours after the original, read "CNN: Erdogan's Foreign Policy Could Soon Reach a Dead End" (RT Arabic, 2020g). Although ostensibly minor, the discrete use of "Erdogan" opposed to "Turkey" was illustrative of a long-standing strategy of elevating individual political actors over state entities or policy.<sup>3</sup>

Mistranslation works in tandem with source laundering, a tactic that was vividly on display in RT3's coverage of protests following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. Images of chaos and violent looting splashed across its headlines and RT3's YouTube station regularly posted unattributed footage of violent protesters in Portland, Seattle, Chicago, and elsewhere.

A June 19 article published by *The New York Times'* Michael Shear on Vice President Mike Pence's unwillingness to utter the words "black lives matter," for example, was reposted on RT Arabic but with broad liberties taken in the translation.

In his article, Shear (2020) writes, "President Trump has been under fire for weeks for his response to protests in cities across the nation in the wake of Mr. Floyd's death" (para. 4). The RT translation, which interpolates the article's paragraphs, presented roughly the same line as "The Trump administration has been subjected to severe criticism in the United States for its handling of the social unrest that erupted across the country and later spread to other countries after the killing of the young American George Floyd" (RT Arabic, 2020a, para. 5).

Among the discrepancies between the source article and the translation, RT3 translates the term *protests* as *al-idtirabat al-ijtima'iya* (social unrest), a far cry from more literal and neutral options like *muzaharat* (demonstrations) or *ihtijajat* (protests). *Al-idtirabat al-ijtima'iya*, which could also be translated as "mass rioting," detours sharply from Shear's language while signaling a clear line of political jargoning insofar as the phrase echoed early descriptions of the Arab Spring by organs of the region's myriad ancien regimes (Greenberg, 2019a, p. 41). Shear's focus on "President Trump" is mitigated by use of the phrase "the Trump administration" (RT Arabic, 2020a, para. 5). But a more notable idiosyncrasy in the above article is that nowhere in the original does Shear (2020) use the qualifier "of American origin" (RT Arabic, 2020a, para. 5). Nor does Shear refer to the killing of Floyd as a "killing"; rather, he uses more legally neutral language like "Mr. Floyd's death" (para. 4). RT3's version worked to legitimize the right-wing counternarrative "all lives matter" by deracializing Floyd and escalating the rhetoric of the protests by describing his death as a killing. Both elements—that he was American and that he was killed—are accurate; yet, neither is present in the source article RT purports to be translating.

As protests escalated across the country, RT3 captured the moment to project a narrative of chaos, but used carefully selected and strategically mistranslated articles to launder its information by attributing the stories to ostensibly neutral and often mainstream sources like the American news channel ABC News. On August 7, for example, RT3 published online a translation of an Associated Press article (see Flaccus, 2020) that appeared on ABC News' website and was featured on its evening broadcast for a piece

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to my former student Amer Amer for this keen observation.



highlighting the disparate nature of the largely peaceful protests in Portland and the often-violent response of law enforcement, including by federal agents (ABC News, 2020). The Associated Press article and ABC News report describe such tactics as an effort to enflame tensions and to discourage peaceful protesters from taking to the streets.

The article, titled "Portland Protesters Cause Mayhem Again, Police Officer Hurt" (ABC News, 2020), begins, "About 200 people, some wielding homemade shields, clashed with police early Friday for the third consecutive night as two other Black Lives Matter rallies proceeded peacefully elsewhere in the city, authorities said" (para. 1). RT3's translation (RT Arabic, 2020f), reverse translated into English, reads, "On Friday, the city of Portland, Oregon, witnessed clashes between police and about 200 protesters who attacked a police station east of the city" (para. 1). Whereas the Associated Press/ABC News article makes explicit the distinction between BLM demonstrators and those "wielding homemade shields" who "clashed with police" (ABC News, 2020, para. 1) by quoting Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler as saying "the violent protesters are also serving as political 'props' for President Donald Trump" who was trying to "portray the protesters as 'sick and dangerous anarchists' running wild in the city's streets" (ABC News, 2020, para. 3), the RT3 version makes no mention of Trump and draws no distinction between BLM demonstrators and those committing violence. The disparity is made vivid in the translation's third paragraph, which is drawn from the original article's seventh paragraph:

Early Friday, as peaceful demonstrations proceeded elsewhere in the city, a group of people gathered at a park in eastern Portland and marched to the local police precinct, where authorities say they spray-painted the building, popped the tires of police cars, splashed paint on the walls, vandalized security cameras and set a fire in a barrel outside the building. One officer was severely injured by a rock, police said, but no additional details were provided. (ABC News, 2020, para. 7)

RT3's (RT Arabic, 2020f) truncated version, reverse translated, reads,

Parallel to two peaceful demonstrations in the city, a number of protesters met in a park east of the city and went to a local police station, put graffiti on its walls, attacked police cars, broke surveillance cameras and set fire to a barrel outside the building. (para. 3)

The RT3 article, which intersperses its translation with tweets by the right-wing commentator and provocateur Andy Ngô and photojournalist Dave Blazer (RT Arabic, 2020f), conflates the "peaceful demonstrations" with the "group of people gathered at a park" (ABC News, 2020, para. 7) by employing use of the Arabic dual (*al-muthanna*). In the RT Arabic version (2020f), the "two peaceful demonstrations" (*muzahiratayn salmitayn*) are partially distinguished by the qualifying phrase *addad min al-muhtijin* (protesters) to describe the people in the park, but the difference between the translation and the original remains glaring (para. 3).

RT3's strategy of mistranslation and source laundering vis-à-vis the United States pertained to issues other than Black Lives Matter.<sup>4</sup> And RT3 was not the Kremlin's only vehicle of strategic mistranslation. A July 26 post on RT Español (2020), for example, declared in its headline "La policía de Seattle declara una revuelta en medio de incendios, vandalismo y enfrentamientos con manifestantes" ("Seattle Police Declare Riot Amid Fire, Vandalism and Clashes With Protesters"). Published almost simultaneously with a Fox News story that ran with a near-identical headline (see Givas, 2020), RT attributed sources to tweets by the Seattle Police Department, Fox News contributor Jason Rantz, and Mike Baker of *The New York Times*. Baker's tweets, including a video of a smoldering Starbucks, was framed as evidence of protest-generated violence; yet, Baker's reporting for the *Times*, also taken from his Twitter feed, presented a wholly different and complex scene of sporadic looting alongside reports of riot control by police.

On the whole, America's Summer 2020 presented prime opportunities for the curation and dissemination of visual and rhetorical evidence to a narrative strategy that had been simmering in Russian state media operations for nearly a decade. The BLM movement, already the target of an extensive disinformation operation on the part of the Kremlin, became a preeminent vehicle for advancing the longstanding narrative of destruction and disorder in the face of democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Articles pertaining to Russia have been prime targets for mistranslation. On July 24, for example, Reuters published an article titled "U.S. Counterspy Gives Rare Warning on Foreign Meddling in U.S. Election" (Hosenball, 2020). In addition to truncating the original by nearly half, the RT3 translation, which appeared within hours of the original, elided the fourth paragraph, which reads, "A January 2017 U.S. intelligence community assessment found Russia meddled in the 2016 election and its goals included aiding U.S. President Donald Trump, who has cast doubt on whether Moscow interfered in that vote" (Hosenball, 2020, para. 4). The RT3 version accurately translated the assessment by the National Counterintelligence and Security Center head William Evanina that "his agency was mainly concerned with interference by China, Russia and Iran" but concludes its translation by adding a final sentence: "The United States had previously accused Russia of meddling (*itadakhul*) in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, but Moscow rejected those accusations, noting that there was no basis for it" (RT Arabic, 2020c, para. 9). Democratic congressional leaders denounced the original report as equivocating on the threat of Russia to the democratic process. The RT3 version goes beyond sowing doubt to bolster Trump's narrative that anything pertaining to Russia amounts to a witch hunt or "hoax" and it does so by attributing the information to Reuters.

**Black Lives by RT**

**Figure 2. Black Lives: Struggle (RT, 2018a, 24:33).**

One of the clearest illustrations of RT's agenda vis-à-vis BLM was a documentary series titled simply *Black Lives*.<sup>5</sup> Launched in April 2019, and later subtitled and rebroadcast in Arabic under the title *Hayat al-soud mohema* (Black Lives Matter),<sup>6</sup> RT's *Black Lives* series offers a master study in long-form propaganda. Comprising 10 episodes, each was filmed with multiple Red-style digital cameras that create a richly textured aesthetic of dense urban shadows, heavy musical background, and emotive lighting; the generic style, despite these flourishes, may best be described as raw documentary. There is no voice overlay or omniscient narration. Rather, the entire series is told through interlocutors (a "KKK member," a "barber," a "street musician"),<sup>7</sup> most of whom are Black and with the exception of several pastors, a defense attorney in Baltimore, or a social media influencer in Philadelphia, none of whom have any public stature or notable expertise. This disembodied quality of the film's unifying narration along with its provocative imagery appear designed to amplify for viewers a sense of the real, in the phenomenological sense; yet, as film theorist André Bazin (2003) observed of an earlier documentary medium, "A photograph of a bullfight might have some documentary or didactic value, but how could it give us back the essence of the spectacle, the mystical triad of animal, man, and crowd?" (p. 29).

Not unlike reality TV, RT's raw documentary *Black Lives* presents an objective or didactic façade that evinces through ambience, tone, and flow of images an underlying sense of systemic decay. Such filmmaking, as philosopher Philippe-Joseph Salazar (2017) describes in his study of ISIS communications, capitalizes on the "analogical" utility of isolate signifiers whose meaning holds value in speculative, not deductive terms (p. 13). Although grounded in the imagistic, concrete, and, in a sense, logical struggle of Black America insofar as crime, poverty, and incarceration—the three predominant themes of the series—do indeed disproportionately impact the Black community, the analogical value supports the Kremlin's global narrative of law and order in the face

<sup>5</sup> See RT (2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, RT Arabic (2020d).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, RT (2019b, 15:14; 2019c, 10:10; 2019d, 5:10).

of democratic anarchy. Unlike the overt propaganda flowing from the Trump White House (one thinks of the staged event in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., in which Trump appeared silent before cameras and displaying a copy of the Bible), law and order are largely absent signifiers in RT's *Black Lives* series. The state, as a whole, appears distant from the relentless image stream of desperation and crime. The explicit portrayal of an armed and militant Black America at odds with an implied ideological apparatus and the pretense of the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement traverse the entirety of the series. A montage of Black misery is set to a hip-hop beat. Armed young Black men patrol unnamed streets. Homes are bordered and shuttered. Black addicts clamor for money. Inveterate Black bodies lie in the streets of an unnamed city. Speeches by Obama or an image of his profile stenciled to a subway pillar are deployed against scenes of hopelessness and despair. Disjointed yet ostensibly connected, such images of unemployment, drug addiction, gun violence, and crime provide visual placeholders, and points of dialectical reinforcement, to the film's upspoken and analogical valuation of a White, orderly, and authoritarian America.

These not-so-subtle political touchstones punctuate an apocalyptic vision of America, a world of "carnage" as Trump ominously described in his 2016 inaugural address (PBS, 2017, 6:20). But more acutely, through the methodology of filmmaking including the sharp juxtaposition of thematic extremes that also characterize the titling of the episodes ("Black Lives Matter Versus the KKK," "Failing Schools Versus Community Education," "Choosing Between Good and Bad in Black U.S. Neighborhoods")<sup>8</sup> and the direct exploitation of the Black community, the series works as a bridge between the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, providing, in turn, a kind of bookend to the story of the Kremlin's global disinformation strategy vis-à-vis the United States.

As detailed by the digital analytical firm New Knowledge for the 2018 Senate report and verified at length by Nicholas Thompson and Issie Lapowsky (2018) for *Wired*, virtually all of the YouTube videos associated with Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) and published in advance of the 2016 election, some 1,100 videos in total, over 95%, focused on "police brutality and Black Lives Matter" (para. 7); 571 of the IRA's YouTube videos had "keywords related to police and police brutality" (Thompson & Lapowsky, 2018, para. 7). Moreover, as Thompson and Lapowsky point out, "the vast majority" of Web domains registered to the IRA pertained to Black Lives Matter and was targeted to the Black community (para. 2). This included the websites DoNotShoot.us and Blackivist.info. On Instagram, the IRA-linked account @blackstagram\_ "amassed more than 300,000 followers and elicited more than 28 million reactions" (Thompson & Lapowsky, 2018, para. 2). Writing in late 2018, Thompson and Lapowsky speculated that the IRA's targeting of Black America in 2016 was intended to "stoke distrust among African Americans in democratic institutions and depress black turnout for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton" (Thompson & Lapowsky, 2018, para. 2). The *Black Lives* documentary series—likely an accumulation of footage that may also have been deployed in segments in 2016—evokes a sense of utter disenchantment with the democratic process, but extends the image of disenchantment to the level of imminent violence, a propagandistic move that gains clarity when viewed alongside other Kremlin influence operations around the globe.

The series' final episode, which appeared on RT3 in July 2020 (see RT Arabic, 2020d), is particularly indicative of the Kremlin's global narrative strategy. In lengthy interviews with Imam Abdul Musa—a little known but controversial American figure who, among other things, was banned from entering the United

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<sup>8</sup> See RT (2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

Kingdom for his advocacy of “terrorist violence” (BBC, 2009, para. 13)—and the Virginia-based pastor Steve Parson who has been a vocal supporter of Trump, the final episode “Black Lives: Trap. Why Civil Rights Aren’t Enough to Make the American Dream Come True” (RT, 2019d), alludes to a burgeoning civil war in the United States. The source of the strife, as Parson explains, is political: “The Democratic party uses it [the label of racism] to keep Black people voting for them” (RT, 2019d, 16:02–16:07). Parson says amid images of a BLM march in New York,

Actually, it’s the Democratic platform that I call the slave master today, meaning what? We’re going to provide for you [Black Americans], we’re going to be the ones who help you. We’ll give you this, we’ll give you that. . . . It’s just to keep control over them [Black Americans].  
(RT, 2019d, 16:09–16:26)

Echoing Republican Party rhetoric on the menace of socialism and the import of self-reliance, Parson, who also calls out Russian interference in U.S. elections as a liberal conspiracy (RT, 2019d, 18:50), is presented as a testimonial figure and positioned as the episode’s principal narrator. Yet, what is notable about his testimony and indeed permeates the series overall are those referents that remain absent from the flow of information. RT’s *Black Lives* series conceives of a murky and largely ahistorical conspiracy, one that is all encompassing and ultimately irresolvable apart from armed conflict. Abdul Musa also invokes the Democratic Party and Obama in particular as having been secretly instrumental in the subjugation of Black Americans. His testimony, however, serves a more overt function of antagonism. Speaking off camera amid a sequence of images invoking inner-city misery, decay, and armed resistance, Abdul Musa proclaims, in response to Obama’s early message of hope, that the “American people have already lost hope but they haven’t lost the kind of hope to rebel” (RT, 2019d, 24:01–24:03). Decontextualized—with no description of titles, politics, or background—RT’s witnesses to the collapse of the so-called American dream express, willfully or not, the Kremlin’s long-standing use of embodied or *puppeted* rhetoric for the advancement of an analogical narrative, one that details the corruption of the democratic process, the threat of civil war, and the collapse of U.S. stability. Ostensibly delivered or, in effect, laundered from the mouths of good faith representatives of the Black cause, the visual and rhetorical substance of the documentary is indistinguishable from Trump’s American carnage.

### **Conclusion**

By Fall 2020, international approval ratings of the United States and its leadership were at an all-time low (Pew Research Center, 2020). Certain regions of the world have always had a “reservoir of default anti-Americanism,” as Ambassador Alberto Fernandez recently noted (Fernandez, 2020, 7:41–7:43). But distrust of American leadership over the tenure of the Trump administration extended to nearly every region of the globe. Multiple and complex factors pertained to the view that U.S. leadership was failing. The Trump administration’s handling of the novel coronavirus along with hostile policies surrounding trade and immigration profoundly shook confidence in the United States’ ability to solve problems on a global stage. However, concurrent with much of the legitimate disillusionment with U.S. policies was an unprecedented swell of what Facebook describes as “coordinated inauthentic behavior” in online media (Facebook, 2019, para. 1). One clear commonality among many of the disinformation campaigns was the intentional subversion of faith in democratic practices through the use of narrative dialectics, pitting images of chaos against images of order and distrust in America’s presence overseas. Russian-based disinformation tactics

drove this ideological sea change. From Sudan to Libya and Madagascar to Yemen, Russian state media reporting worked to delegitimize prodemocracy movements as foreign-backed conspiracies and to reinforce the narrative of authoritarian regimes whose stability and cooperation with Russia was seen as conducive to the Kremlin's interests in the region. As RT's spin on the Black Lives Matter movement showed, this global strategy was capable of absorbing any range of cultural and political ephemera. The focus on BLM and the representation of the movement to the Arab world as evidence of democracy's peril further illustrated the interchangeability of disinformation targets in the 21st century and the replicability of strategic narratives across cultural and geopolitical fault lines.

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