

# The State of Arab Media since 2011

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The last seven years will perhaps be remembered as a time of re-drawing the political map of the Middle East. The uprising in Tunisia, which gained momentum on the eve of 2011, sparked the upheavals in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. The wave of protests also extended to the Gulf region: a series of anti-government protests arose in Bahrain between 2011 and 2014, suppressed only by the military forces of neighbouring armies, particularly Saudi Arabia and UAE. In Egypt, what began as an admirable peaceful collective action turned into violent outbreaks in a nation that has become divided between diverse ideological camps, chief among them being the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. Each camp unleashed a new wave of newspapers and broadcasting projects as platforms for both the anti-government and anti-opposition voices. Between 2011 and 2014, Egypt saw the rise and fall of four different ruling powers (the military, the Muslim Brotherhood, the head of the constitutional court followed by el-Sisi). In Syria, more than a quarter of a million Syrians lost their lives and more than 11 million others were forced to flee their homes in what began as peaceful anti-government protests in 2011 and turned into a full-scale civil war, which has been raging ever since. The rebellion soon became an armed and Islamist faction, with the rise of so-called ISIS. This group took control of large strips of Syria and neighbouring Iraq, declaring the area as its 'caliphate' in 2014. This fictive state managed to attract

thousands of European Muslims, or so-called 'foreign fighters.' The Gulf states' meddling in the Syrian conflict, regarded as a proxy war between Iran and Syria supported by Russia, on the one hand, versus the Gulf states and the US, on the other, eventually fractured the relations among the Gulf states, igniting the ongoing blockade against Qatar.

Amidst these ensuing conflicts, Arab media have been used as a propaganda tool in accentuating discord among Arab states, which further divided the region into sectarian, economic, and political loyalties, and divided each Arab society into groups that deemed themselves true representatives of an indigenous identity, versus those who did not.

In this article, I elaborate on two functions of Arab media since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, namely as a tool for enforcing national identity and as a tool for re-drawing historical ties with neighbouring states.

## Nationalism — Dead or Alive?

The Gulf states have long ascribed to a pan-Islamist identity that would bind them to other Muslim-majority nations, as an alternative to the threatening nationalist mobilization; however, they recently undertook several steps in the opposite direction by promoting their own unique sense of identity. It is true that the Gulf national identity is usually enforced through tribal linkages, which, ironically, marginalize certain internal voices, such as the so-called Bedoon or tribesmen, who do not have formal citizenship rights and whose ancestors had settled in the Gulf but were excluded from registration of citizenship at the time of

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the formation of several Gulf states. Nonetheless, each Gulf state is now striving to inculcate a strong sense of nationalism among its citizens through a range of initiatives such as national days, national museums, and heritage projects. This sense of nationalism even extends to foreign wars such as that in Yemen, which was launched to undermine the perceived threat from Shiite Iran. The Saudi State strove to imbue patriotic sentiments in various demonstrations, in an attempt to garner support for its war on Yemen. The State has actively used social media platforms to enforce this support while engaging in a virtual proxy war with Iran via Twitter,<sup>2</sup> by accusing Iran of harbouring terrorism and sectarian hatred; on the other hand, Iran blamed the rising terrorism on the Wahhabi ideology which originated in Saudi Arabia. A Saudi animated video recently went viral on YouTube<sup>3</sup> and other social media platforms featuring a full-scale Saudi military attack, led by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, against Iran; the video was in English with subtitles in Arabic and Farsi. The animation was reported to be in retaliation to a previously released Iranian film<sup>4</sup> in 2016, simulating missile attacks on Saudi targets.

On the other hand, various media have been used by Arab states as platforms from which to launch verbal attacks on neighbouring states. A number of prominent singers from UAE and Saudi Arabia, for instance, launched a new song attacking the Qatari Emir and his father's policies. The song entitled *golol Qatar* or *Tell Qatar*,<sup>5</sup> sent a harsh message to the Qatari leadership regarding the possible consequences of its tactics against neighbouring countries, while praising the Saudi leadership's role in standing up to Qatari policies.<sup>6</sup> Qatar, on the other hand, marked its national day in 2017 with a massive celebration, unlike any other year, as a sign of defiance to the imposed blockade by Saudi Arabia,

UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Moreover, Saudi Arabia celebrated its 87th National Day<sup>7</sup> in September 2017: various ceremonies were held in public places, in which streets and houses were covered with green paint (the colour of the Saudi flag) and pictures of the Saudi King Salman and the Crown Prince, in a bold display of patriotism and an inflated expression of loyalty to the current Saudi leadership. The UAE also used its national day to create a sense of belonging to one nation through the slogan 'Mutaheda' or 'United,' and a film of the same title featured on local television channels.<sup>8</sup>

### Arab media since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring has functioned as a tool for enforcing national identity and as a tool for re-drawing historical ties with neighbouring states

In Egypt, mainstream media outlets, whether state-funded or privately owned, had no shortage of patriotic songs. They praised the Egyptian military under the leadership of el-Sisi for delivering the nation from the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood (MB) rule. A good example was one called *Teslam el-Ayadi* or *May these hands be safe*,<sup>9</sup> which referred to the strong hands of the Armed Forces in toppling the MB regime; the song became an embodiment of Egyptian military power in 'rescuing' Egypt from the MB nightmare. Closure of MB and Salafist media outlets in Egypt soon followed. The massive exodus of thousands of MB members and supporters fleeing to Qatar and Turkey allowed many new MB-supporting outlets to appear, such as *Mekameleen* and *el-Sharq* television channels beaming from Turkey. These out-

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer WILLIAMS. *Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting a proxy war — on Twitter*, [www.vox.com/2016/9/16/12934170/saudi-arabia-iran-proxy-war-hajj-twitter](http://www.vox.com/2016/9/16/12934170/saudi-arabia-iran-proxy-war-hajj-twitter)

<sup>3</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9selhGBPdek](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9selhGBPdek)

<sup>4</sup> MEMRI TV. *Iranian Animated Film Simulates Yemeni Missile Attacks on Saudi Oil Fields, Military and Civilian Targets*, January 2016 [www.memri.org/tv/iranian-animated-film-simulates-yemeni-missile-attacks-saudi-oil-fields-military-and-civilian](http://www.memri.org/tv/iranian-animated-film-simulates-yemeni-missile-attacks-saudi-oil-fields-military-and-civilian)

<sup>5</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2mFAJXmVJ8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2mFAJXmVJ8)

<sup>6</sup> Jailan MAMDOUH. "UAE singers convey warning through 'Tell Qatar' song," *Egypt Today*, 7 November 2017, [www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/31490/UAE-singers-convey-warning-through-“Tell-Qatar”-song](http://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/31490/UAE-singers-convey-warning-through-“Tell-Qatar”-song)

<sup>7</sup> Staff writers. "In pictures: How Saudi Arabia celebrated its 87th national day," *Al Arabiya English*, 23 September 2017. <http://english.al-ariya.net/en/features/2017/09/23/IN-PICTURES-How-Saudi-Arabia-celebrated-its-87th-national-day.html>

<sup>8</sup> Mutaheda (official version) <https://vimeo.com/14002184>

<sup>9</sup> Amina KHAIRY. "Common Sense in Egypt: Teslam El Ayadi," *Egypt Independent*, 2014. [www.egyptindependent.com/common-sense-egypt-teslam-el-ayadi/](http://www.egyptindependent.com/common-sense-egypt-teslam-el-ayadi/)

lets promoted a cyclical view of history as a repetitive series of events by moving the MB up and down the ladder of power, as I discuss in a recent analysis of the MB media.<sup>10</sup> The MB, and indeed other Islamist media, usually focus on the metaphor of a constant historical battle against Western political and cultural incursions. One example of this 'blame game' was shown in the Arab media response to the Syrian refugee crisis,<sup>11</sup> which held Europe responsible for the disaster, citing the history of European imperialism in the region since the Sykes-Picot agreement. There were some media outlets which claimed that Germany only accepted so many Syrian professionals to meet their needs for new, cheap labour, thus causing a major Syrian 'brain drain'; other voices blamed the Arabs themselves for abandoning their fellow Arabs in Syria, in what was seen as contempt for the long-held slogans promoting Arab fraternity.

### Fake News or Fake History?

There are several Arab outlets, particularly Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain, which stand in opposition to Qatar and Turkey. They have called for a revisit of the historical accounts of Ottoman rule and its role in 'weakening the region,' including Egypt, in which historians argue that, Ottoman rule imposed isolation on Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Syrian media have circulated calls to revise history curricula for primary schools to replace positive terms about Ottoman rule with negative ones such as 'usurper';<sup>13</sup> the Syrian government has also been calling to stop the flow of Turkish TV series, which used to be dubbed in Syrian dialect before being distributed to many Arab television networks. The Turkish President Erdogan and the UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed posted comments on a shared tweet on Twitter.<sup>14</sup> Their dispute was about whether

or not Ottoman troops had stolen material wealth and manuscripts from Medina, now part of Saudi Arabia, in 1916. This tension was exposed yet again in December 2017, when the extraordinary summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)<sup>15</sup> was held to protest against President Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. The summit was attended by only 16 Heads of State and had no representation from several Arab countries. The upheavals in the region, ever since the Arab Spring, were claimed to have drawn the Arab leaders into close alliance with Israel, although in public, they still declared Israel as the number-one enemy. Egyptian talk show hosts<sup>16</sup> were also allegedly briefed by Egypt's intelligence services to tone down opposition to Trump's decision.

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Al-Jazeera Arabic,<sup>17</sup> on the other hand, was accused of propagating hatred in its coverage of reactions to Trump's decision. The channel found itself embroiled in the recent crisis triggering the blockade against Qatar; the Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, called for the closure of Al-Jazeera and all other Qatari-owned outlets. The crisis was not about Al-Jazeera per se, but an attempt to silence the Qatari voices and clip Qatar's wings regarding its foreign policy. The real question is, what Al-Jazeera will look like if it survives the current crisis. If it does, it would very likely tone down its coverage of other states in the region, which means a further loss of its credibility. The use of Al-Jazeera as a tool in Qatar's foreign policy

<sup>10</sup> Noha MELLOR. *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood: Da'wa, Discourse, and Political Communication*, Routledge, 2018

<sup>11</sup> *Contradictions in Arab newspapers on dealing with the crisis of Syrian immigrants* (in Arabic), 2015 [www.bbc.com/arabic/inthe-press/2015/09/150907\\_arabic\\_press\\_monday](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/inthe-press/2015/09/150907_arabic_press_monday)

<sup>12</sup> [www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1236582](http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1236582)

<sup>13</sup> <https://aawsat.com/home/article/710826>

<sup>14</sup> *Turkey's Erdogan defends Ottoman commander after UAE minister retweets criticism*, in [www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-emirates-medina/turkeys-erdogan-defends-ottoman-commander-after-uae-minister-retweets-criticism-idUSKBN1EE1KW](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-emirates-medina/turkeys-erdogan-defends-ottoman-commander-after-uae-minister-retweets-criticism-idUSKBN1EE1KW)

<sup>15</sup> Daoud KUTTAB. *Istanbul summit exposes divisions within Arab world*, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/organization-islamic-cooperation-meeting-arab-divisions.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/organization-islamic-cooperation-meeting-arab-divisions.html)

<sup>16</sup> David KIRKPATRICK. *Tapes Reveal Egyptian Leaders' Tacit Acceptance of Jerusalem Move*, [www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/world/middleeast/egypt-jerusalem-talk-shows.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/world/middleeast/egypt-jerusalem-talk-shows.html)

<sup>17</sup> *Al Jazeera coverage of Trump's Jerusalem move 'promoting hatred'*, [www.arabnews.com/node/1207531/media](http://www.arabnews.com/node/1207531/media)

only proves that no news outlet in the Arab region is truly independent. Al-Jazeera made a huge difference to the previously stagnant Arab news market when it appeared in 1996 — Arab audiences were following outlets like the CNN and BBC for news about their region at the time — but it later lost part of its credibility for its coverage of the Arab uprisings, thus triggering a wave of resignations<sup>18</sup> by presenters and producers who claimed the channel's coverage was aligned with Qatar's foreign policy. Later, Qatar accused the UAE of hacking Qatar's state news agency,<sup>19</sup> and planting fake news that led to the recent diplomatic rift in the region, which had not happened in years. There were also claims that fake news was being circulated online, such as that Arab nations had demanded that FIFA strip Qatar of the 2022 World Cup.<sup>20</sup> Al-Jazeera Arabic responded by claiming that, Saudi Arabia and UAE wanted to champion a new form of "liberal Islam" and a "secularist trend."<sup>21</sup> In retaliation, the Saudi television channel *Saudi 24* ran a whole episode in September 2017, condemning what it called "Qatar's carrying of the banner of Christian evangelism,"<sup>22</sup> on the grounds that, the Catholic Church in the religious complex in Qatar, was part of an ongoing strategy to convert Arab Muslims.

### Can Europe Help?

The chaos and turmoil characterizing the region impelled many Arab states and groups to appeal to the EU for support and moderation. The EU was called on to mediate, and to help de-escalate the ongoing tensions between Qatar, on the one hand, and the blockade coalition led by Saudi Arabia, on the other. The EU was also called upon to reaffirm its support for Lebanon, following the sudden resignation of Saad al-Hariri. There have been additional calls for the EU to play an active role in reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, subsequent to the

American President's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, at a time when the EU is still battling with an ongoing refugee crisis.

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The Arab region has seen tough times during this period.<sup>23</sup> The collapse of oil prices and dwindling revenues in the wealthy Gulf states have resulted in Arab expatriates being replaced by natives or a cheaper Asian labour force. This has had a negative impact on the flow of remittances, which are used to subsidize poorer Arab countries. Although the region's leaders and populations still blame the current morass on decades of meddling in the region by the Americans and Europeans, it has become impossible not to admit the region's own weaknesses in inflicting pain on its own peoples. The prevalent insecurity is, moreover, not confined to the Middle East — in 2014, the region accounted for 45% of the world's terrorist attacks,<sup>24</sup> 68.5% of its battle-related deaths, and 57.5% of its refugees.

Meanwhile, Arab media seems to be sticking to its customary role: a propaganda tool in the hands of statesmen and religious groups stirring not only anti-Western discourse, but also animosity, often against selected neighbouring Arab states, instead of facilitating useful debate about possible solutions for the current stalemate. There is dwindling hope that Arab media will ever be able to separate itself from the ensuing political upheaval, despite the huge amount of European funding being poured into training Arab journalists and supporting various media projects.

<sup>18</sup> Adam TAYLOR. *REPORT: 22 Staffers Resign At Al-Jazeera Over Claims Of Biased Coverage In Egypt*, 2013. [www.businessinsider.com/al-jazeera-resignations-reported-in-egypt-2013-7?IR=T](http://www.businessinsider.com/al-jazeera-resignations-reported-in-egypt-2013-7?IR=T)

<sup>19</sup> Catherine PHILIP. *UAE 'planted fake news to trigger Qatar crisis'*, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/emiratis-planted-fake-news-to-trigger-qatar-crisis-08qd5d08g](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/emiratis-planted-fake-news-to-trigger-qatar-crisis-08qd5d08g)

<sup>20</sup> *Qatar 2022: Fake news story claims Arab nations told Fifa they will boycott World Cup*, [www.bbc.com/sport/football/40626063](http://www.bbc.com/sport/football/40626063)

<sup>21</sup> [www.aljazeera.net/programs/newsreports/2017/7/29](http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/newsreports/2017/7/29) In Arabic

<sup>22</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfO\\_C5d03eM&t=3s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfO_C5d03eM&t=3s) In Arabic

<sup>23</sup> *The Arab winter*, [www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21685503-five-years-after-wave-uprisings-arab-world-worse-ever](http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21685503-five-years-after-wave-uprisings-arab-world-worse-ever)

<sup>24</sup> UNDP. *Arab Human Development Report 2016, Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, [www.arabstates.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/report/AHDR%20Reports/AHDR%202016/AHDR%20Final%202016/AHDR2016En.pdf](http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/dam/rbas/report/AHDR%20Reports/AHDR%202016/AHDR%20Final%202016/AHDR2016En.pdf)