



## **An Overview and Assessment on the Current Conflicts in the Arab Media: A Critical Vision**

**Sahar Talaat, Egyptian Researcher and Journalist**

The Arab media has been influenced by emerging news that has been reshaping the political arena over the last few years, in particular the high mobilization of several conflicts and wars in the region. Southern Mediterranean countries are facing multi-dimensional political violence that includes several fronts, such as the military attack on Gaza for more than a month, civil war (Syria, Libya, Yemen), the war on terrorism (Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, militia conflicts in Libya, and terrorism in Lebanon and Egypt), forced immigration of ethnic groups in Iraq and Syria, and so on.

Since 2011, there has been a new political landscape with the socio-political movements known as the Arab Spring. These new socio-political mobilizations sought civil rights, modernity, social equality and liberties and wanted civil society to build a better strategy for the future of these nations. The revolutions promoted a new opportunity to understand that the fear they had been living under should end. Arab society recognized that there is no place for unachieved promises. Therefore, the new shift towards the power of citizenship has encouraged the Arab media to play a vital role over the last four years, since the beginning of the revolts in some Arab countries.

The aim of this article is to shed light on the treatment of news and information dedicated to the masses during the times of war and conflict in the Arab region, particularly during August, September and October 2014. The intention is to study the use of symbols and signs regarding the socio-cultural perspective and its influence on public opinion. The study reflects on the forms of media as an active tool in the creation of Arab and international policies, attempts to observe the active forms of media influencing the political arena, and detects how mass culture is manipulated. Accordingly, it examines types of information management as a vehicle of control, which is an essential tool in developing political, social, cultural, educational and economic policies.

### **The Media and the New Political Communication**

Since the first spark of the popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, followed by Libya, Yemen and Syria, there has been a new Arab political landscape, seeking new political strategies

and new forms of social movements calling for modernity, civility, liberty, and collective actions. Their aim was to accomplish a modern plan to build a new stage for a better Arab political system. The population of this area learnt the lesson and understood that fear, experienced deep within their minds, no longer has any place in their daily lives. Over the last four years, they have sought to overcome intimidation and fear by looking to a different future. The shakeup of the political interests of some groups is shaping a new tone of political manipulation, and is modifying a new Arab culture so as to decentralize the hegemony of the state and shift the power regarding political interests. Meanwhile, citizens have been empowered to take matters into their own hands and make their own decisions, challenging the centrism of the government monopoly and hegemony of the regime.

During the old political regimes, which lasted for decades, such as Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya and Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, few imagined that such an act would plunge the whole region into a rebellious movement. These abundant mass protests were created by the lives, energy and participation of the whole population and led by young motivated Arabs who took risks and made themselves visible by demanding dignity, liberty, equality, and decent lives. Arab citizens have suffered from their lack of social and civil rights; and now not only are young people trying to gain freedom and social justice, but so are all sectors of Arab society. They call for democracy, freedom of expression, transparency, an independent judiciary system, strong political parties, open government, equal opportunities for women to be part of the decision-making process, a better education system, and an end to the brutal humiliation and insult of tyrannous regimes, among other crucial demands.

During the authoritarian period of government, the Arab media followed the political will to enforce the image of the regime's attitudes and work on maintaining the status quo in society. However, the wave of mass social mobilization and the strong role of the social media, which was followed by the traditional media, created a primary area for new political communication research. Researchers and specialized scholars are studying the process of protest movements in various countries, focusing on online activism, types of information flow, the political context review in the media, and the appearance of violence and its effect on the public sphere, among other important themes that are opening a vibrant debate. The current media changes are unleashing micro-level concerns that create debates about the current mechanism of the mass media mobilization. The sudden explosion of the revolts in the Arab world obviously promoted a broader vision of how the media works and processes information, in particular because of social media tools, citizen media formats and internet activism. Those elements are forcing the media institution to be more involved in constructing new visions of the needs of audiences, public problems and the dramatic events that are influencing Arab society. So it is time to work on developing the construction of the national identity, to avoid stereotyping and encourage the conceptualization of the media/culture industry.

### **The Priorities of the News Coverage**

This article observes the political process that engages extreme changes in the Middle East through the media. Choosing two of the most prominent Arab newspapers, *Al Hayat* and *Al Shark Al Awsat*, based in London, could help in describing the current devastating situation in some hotspot areas, such as the war in Iraq, Syria and Gaza, fighting Islamic State terrorism, the civil war in Yemen and Libya, and so on. Both papers are recognized at national and international level.

The study is based on choosing four random days during the month of October (1st, 5th, 15th and 17th) with the objective of exploring the message structure in the headlines, the quality of the news, and the major themes. Current events encourage assessment of the conflicting developments on different levels (journalistic, cultural, educational, political, economic, etc...). The study seeks to reconsider the overarching focus on the current conflicts in the Arab countries and its interrelation with contextualizing events and how the priorities are established in the policies of the region.

From a quantitative view, the theme of the Islamic State (IS), known in the Arab world as *Daeesh*, leads the number of news stories with almost 80% in both newspapers. This high figure is considered a very significant indication. There has been a shift in terrorism and war coverage during the last three years. Al Qaeda was the most famous element of terrorism in Arab and international news coverage. Now we discover that the emergence of Al Nusra in Syria (one of the most radical groups fighting in Syria) is declining. This group supported the Free Army of Syria that was created to fight against the national army, defending the Bashar regime. Lately, the Islamic State or the new Caliphate in Iraq and Syria (the Levant) has been rising intensively and almost hijacking the idea of state sovereignty in Iraq. Most of the news coverage dedicated a great deal of space to the consensus of the International Coalition in fighting the IS. The editors of the newspapers have chosen emotional images on the front pages, such as waves of refugees, devastated women, and children fighting.

The rest of the news coverage during the four days varied between the crisis in Yemen, the Hothies entering the capital and starting to extend their rule over the government, and the stability of the country. The armed conflict in Libya is indicating signs of disintegration and a territory of combat between the military group that supports the elected parliament and fighting against the independent Islamist militia trying to create a chaotic situation and exacerbate instability in Libya. In Syria, violence escalated to an unprecedented level and neither regional nor international actors tried to discuss a real solution.

### **Analysing the Research Findings: Main Topics and Journalistic Formulas**

The news articles, opinion pages and columns of both Arab papers present the current threat that is provoking the feeling of disintegration, division and separation in the region by using

symbols and emotional pictures. Some writers have explained the establishment of artificial political entities that would be under the authority of international imperialism. The news of IS brutality and stories about the suffering of ethnicities and women highlight the artificial political entities that are accepting this hostile presence.

The increasing rationalization in organizing and managing the front page layout of the two newspapers is following the papers' media agenda to present the terrorism and conflicts in the region seriously. They are attempting to enable readers to interpret the current struggle in order to create counter-insurgency as a way of fighting terrorism and presenting the dilemma between the political and social interests. Sometimes, the treatment of news stories or the opinion pages indicate an attempt to persuade decision-makers and public opinion to evaluate the current socio-cultural conditions in the Arab region. They use precise journalistic formulas to reach the mainstream. The journalists reveal the homogeneity position of society and draw attention to the atrocities of the terrorist groups.

The news gathering process in both newspapers indicates that there is an actual political phase promoted by political agitators to build local support against terrorism. The idea of describing terror prompted a "political wing" that is supporting the military intervention to eliminate the terrorist attacks of IS. The theme of these groups misinterpreting Islam was discussed while there were meetings to identify the number of foreigners that joined the IS group from Europe and other countries around the world. The media presented the tools of recruiting these people by using sympathy with the Islamic religion. So in some parts of the news they explained how terrorist groups motivate potential future suicide bombers. They highlighted the psychological aspects of the chosen people driven by humiliation, revenge and retaliation, in addition to escaping the realities in their countries.

In a personal interview with Anwar Al Hawary, the columnist and ex editor-in-chief of the Egyptian independent newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* argued that there has been a clear reality of conflicts and terrorism over these days. States are falling and fundamentalist military terrorist groups are preparing to replace them. The states that have been geographically mapped since the departure of colonialism in the region during the last century, especially since the Second World War, are disappearing. Unfortunately, there is no modern civil political alternative to secure the heritage of these states. The replacement of some Arab regimes in some countries is simply guided by religious fundamentalism. The basis of the conflict now in the region is between the idea of establishing an Islamic radical state and a modern national state. The old systems did not give up and the radical Islamists tried to organize themselves to take power.

Terrorism is spreading because the old regimes did not implement democracy and avoided the system of dialogue. At the same time, the fundamentalists are discarding the presence of the "other" and they do not believe in democracy.

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The great tension in the current political situation and the high presence of war and terrorist attacks in the Middle East are all elements that intensify the news reporting in the media. It is an active reporting time for the Arab and international media.

In the *Al Hayat* and *Al Shark Al Awsat* newspapers, the “mediatization” element is present and indicates how the Arab media is moving toward the center of the social process. It is considered the promoter of the concept and practices of constructing the public sphere within the media and society. The mediatization element is elevating the function and role of the communicators in describing the effects of the political arena to the population and offers an opportunity for politicians and decision-makers to assess the socio-political and cultural interests in the region. However, there is a tendency to fragment the culture interest as both Arab papers have been trying to support the cultural persistence in the media to support democratic values and promote the right to information within the difficult current conditions. They are articulating the challenges now facing Arab policies. Culture has been discarded from political strategies for decades, but now with the flow of the Internet it is hard not to adopt and include culture in the Arab political process.

### **A New Role for the Media is Needed to Raise Awareness and Encourage Cultural Journalism**

There are several questions on constructing a deep political process in coordination with quality media information dynamics. The years of the revolutions in the Arab world have opened a new road guaranteeing that the Arab population and its social forces are determined to remove any inclination to head backward. The example of the legislative election of Tunisia proves that although some forces were trying to hijack the democratic process that emerged with the revolts, there is still a chance to implement the demands of the population. At the same time, the political changes revealed the authentic impediments that obstruct progress in fighting against the entrenched socio-political, educational and health corruption styles that were the backbone of the Arab states institutions. Therefore, the current political conditions are closely linked to decades of a pyramidal political structure that adopted centralization, a unidirectional political process, non-transparent administration, and so on. As a result, sustainable development was a partial option in the political system. This potential fundamentalism battle in the Arab media and on the international level regarding the fight against terrorism is making the message more uniform. Despite the contextual differences of media treatment, we find that terrorist media resources and the international media institutions have fallen into the trap of promoting uniformity in their messages over time. The

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message generally introduced by terrorists concentrates on promoting their fight for liberation and freedom against tyranny, while using the name of God for their objective. Governments mostly respond to the terrorist propaganda with the same message: “they are fighting radical minorities using evil methods to demolish civilization and impose fanatical ideologies.”

The Arab media is paying serious attention to communicating with their mass audience to counter radicalization and terrorism. There is an essential need to establish an accurate strategy to study the cultural, social and ideological roots of terrorism in Arab countries, and then find the right solutions. The media, as gatekeepers and agenda setters, should determine the nature of news coverage of terrorists and their editorial line.

Until now, the Arab media has not developed modern mediated tools to promote cultural journalism and encourage more open spaces for interactivity. Raising awareness is one of the pillars of promoting media development that encourages education and cultural communication. This study observed that there is a tension between media influence and the reader. Moreover, the Arab media still thinks it holds the upper hand in its relationship with social movements and the population; but the media should consider that the social movements and the population represent a potential source of “news” for it.