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Al Arabiya: The “Saudispeak” of the Arab World

The long-running strategic rivalries between various actors in the wider Middle East are no longer limited to the real world, where territorial control, energy resources, military might, and economic interests used to be the major sources of contention or conflict. With the heightening of globalization and rapid growth of information and communication technologies in the 1990s and 2000s, a great ideational scramble for a larger share of public opinion, or what is at times referred to as the campaign for “hearts and minds,” has taken hold in the region. One could witness the impact of media networks on public opinion and their mobilization to action during and after the Arab uprisings, which broke out in Tunisia in late December 2010 and spread like wildfire throughout the Middle East and North Africa, leading to a “reshaping” of the whole region (Telhami, 2013).

Today, even fundamentalist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are embracing the potentials of modern media to disseminate their ideals and ideology to a global audience. The Middle East is a region where socio-political dynamics in both domestic and foreign-policy domains is deeply affected by struggles over identity (Castells, 2010, p. xx; Kumaraswamy, 2006; Telhami & Barnett, 2002, pp. 1–22; Zweiri & Zahid, 2007). Stakeholders of varying functions and degrees of influence, including state actors, nonstate entities, intellectual elites, and grassroots organizations, are finding themselves increasingly reliant on the virtual space of media that facilitates the exercise of “new” public diplomacy (Hocking, 2005; Melissen, 2005, pp. 11–25) and enables the practice of “viral politics” and highly networked political activity (Breindl & Gustafsson, 2011; Gustafsson, 2009).

Launched in August 2007, [Al Arabiya News](#) is the English-language Web service of the Saudi-run Al Arabiya TV channel, which itself came on the air in March 2003. Al Arabiya News includes three other online versions in [Arabic](#), [Urdu](#), and [Persian](#). The channel forms a significant component of Saudi Arabia’s sprawling media empire in the Arab world and beyond, encompassing a wide range of outlets and networks such as the pan-Arab dailies [Al Hayat](#) and [Asharq Al-Awsat](#) both based in London, the English-language daily [Arab News](#) in

Jeddah, the online news portal [Elaph](#) in London, the [Rotana Group](#) conglomerate owned by the Saudi business tycoon Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, as well as the Dubai-headquartered [Middle East Broadcasting Corporation](#) (MBC) that has the greatest holdings in the Al Arabiya news network. Acting as “a bridge between the Arabic-language television channel and the English-speaking world,” Al Arabiya News seeks to “deepen understanding of Arab societies, cultures and economies,” according to its mission statement (Al Arabiya News, 2013).

The type of “understanding” it offers, however, cannot be taken for granted, as it is arguably colored and framed in keeping with the greater political agenda pursued by the Saudi government in the external and domestic spheres. As such, its stories are demonstrably different from the voices coming out of, say, the Qatar-based [Al Jazeera](#), the U.S.-funded [Alhurra](#), the Moscow-based [RT Arabic](#), the UK-sponsored [BBC Arabic](#), and the Iran-headquartered [Alalam](#) news networks. Representing a primarily pro-establishment narrative of events, Al Arabiya has since its inception been committed to promoting a worldview that is intended not only to fit but also to further a Saudi-friendly order in the Arab world, in the face of contending narratives promulgated by Riyadh’s regional rivals, not least Tehran and Doha. Thus, while the Egyptian military’s forceful ousting of democratically elected Islamist President Mohamed Morsi was labeled a “military coup” by Al Jazeera (Bishara, 2013a, 2013b; Ibrahim, 2013), it was hailed as people’s “second revolution” on Al Arabiya (Al-Rashed, 2013).¹ The explanation is to be found in the totally different relations of the Muslim Brotherhood—to which Morsi belonged—with the Qatari and Saudi governments.

Representing what one may dub *Saudispeak* in the Arab world, this overarching political discourse, is characterized, *inter alia*, by a powerful tinge of paternalistic pan-Arabism, which tends to be invoked in opposition to the perceived threat of Israeli Zionism on the one hand and Persian nationalism or Iranian hegemony on the other. The ideological attachment often takes the form of a status quo-reinforcing sectarianism that not only pictures Shiite Islam and its exponents as a creeping menace to peace and stability in the Middle East, but also counters any type of revolutionary movement—Muslim Brotherhood or otherwise—that has the potential to unravel the old guard.

The very selection of languages that informs the Web presence of Al Arabiya provides an enlightening glimpse into the overall political mentality and strategic considerations of its agenda-setters. While Saudi rulers deem post-revolutionary Iran and its Shiite allies in Syria and Lebanon a security threat whose ambitions, nuclear or otherwise, need to be confronted, Sunni-majority Pakistan is understood to be a valuable Saudi ally in South Asia, so much so that even atomic cooperation in the form of weapons transfer from Islamabad to Riyadh has been seriously contemplated as a deterrence against a potentially nuclear-armed Tehran (Henderson, Forthcoming; Urban, 2013). Such a geopolitical positioning may explain the media platform’s largely critical attitude toward the Iranian establishment and sympathetic approach to the Pakistani military, which manifest themselves more specifically in its Persian and Urdu online versions, not least in their opinion columns.²

Despite being a proponent of the status quo and defender of the old guard in regional affairs, Al Arabiya reveals a slightly reformist tone over certain matters of domestic politics and social policymaking in Saudi Arabia, particularly when

it comes to such controversial issues as the official ban on women's driving and the notorious performance of the Saudi religious police—also known as the “Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice,” which is in charge of enforcing the *Sharia* law in the Muslim country. This fairly against-the-grain disposition has rendered the news outlet considerably unpopular with the nation's ultra-conservative religious authorities, who predominantly adhere to strict interpretations of Sunni Islam under Wahhabism and Salafism. Pertinently, criticism of the Al Saud royal family and contestation of Islamic doctrines constitute the two broad red lines of media activity in the monarchy; newspapers are installed by “royal decree” and almost all domestic outlets are overseen by the state-run Broadcasting Service of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (BSKSA) (BBC, 2013).

Yet, the telling irony is that despite the vast magnitude of its lucrative media empire, Saudi Arabia seems to be lacking a strong normative voice in the international community, a chief reason for which may be found in Riyadh's systematic attempts to stifle public discourse and critical debate at home.

Notes

¹Notably, Marwan Bishara has been working as the senior political analyst at Al Jazeera and Abdulrahman Al-Rashed is the general manager of Al Arabiya news channel. Accordingly, their opinion editorials may throw some light on the general ideological perspective and political orientation of these media platforms.

²For individual examples, see the opinion pieces written by Shahin Fatemi (an Iranian dissident academic based in France) and Hossein Bagherzadeh (an Iranian human rights activist and political dissident in Britain) on Al Arabiya Persian, as well as Mansoor Jafar (the editor of Al Arabiya Urdu, based in Pakistan) and Irfan Siddiqui (a columnist for Pakistan's conservative *Jang Daily*) on Al Alabiya Urdu.

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Web Resources

Alalam: <http://www.alalam.ir/>
Al Arabiya (Arabic): <http://www.alarabiya.net/>
Al Arabiya (Persian): <http://farsi.alarabiya.net/>
Al Arabiya (Urdu): <http://urdu.alarabiya.net/>
Al Arabiya News: <http://english.alarabiya.net/>
Al Hayat: <http://alhayat.com/>
Alhurra: <http://www.alhurra.com/>
Al Jazeera: <http://www.aljazeera.com/>
Arab News: <http://www.arabnews.com/>
Asharq Al-Awsat: <http://www.aawsat.net/>
BBC Arabic: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/>
Elaph: <http://www.elaph.com/>
Jang Daily: <http://jang.com.pk/jang/>
Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC): <http://www.mbc.net/ar.html>
Rotana Group: <http://www.rotana.net/>
RT Arabic: <http://arabic.rt.com/>

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