SATELLITE SECTARIANISATION OR PLAIN OLD PARTISANSHIP?

INCITING VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB MAINSTREAM MEDIA

JESSICA WATKINS

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Satellite Sectarianisation or Plain Old Partisanship?
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Abstract

This report assesses widespread claims that pan-Arab satellite news channels are responsible for inciting sectarian violence during the Arab uprisings. Based on an empirical study of how the most popular channels (*Al-Jazeera Arabic* and *Al-Arabiya*) and a competitive newcomer (*Al-Mayadeen*) have framed seminal events involving violence between sects in Syria and Iraq, the report finds that while often geo-politically charged, some of these claims are valid. While abusive language and direct promotion of violence are rare in a mainstream context, incitement to sectarian violence has been invoked primarily through linguistic and thematic tropes that forge legitimacy claims and narratives of victimhood. The paper draws on these findings to make recommendations for UK policymaker engagement with the Arab media.

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Introduction

Post-2010, the credibility of mainstream Arab news outlets has overall diminished. Pan-Arab satellite channels, previously celebrated for their relatively balanced reporting, have experienced considerable dips in viewership in light of accusations of inciting violence along sectarian and/or partisan lines. Audience user trends have diversified, with viewers now seeking to verify news through a range of sources.[1] Media outlets are nonetheless capable of rapid reformulation, and shifts in media consumption do not negate the ongoing role of the traditional media in influencing Arab public opinion across the region.

With this in mind, a better understanding of whether and how mainstream Arabic language news providers have incited sectarian violence in their coverage of domestic conflicts in the Middle East can have practical implications for policymakers. In a mainstream context, claims of sectarian incitement are frequently politically charged, and, as this research shows, in conflict situations it is often difficult to pinpoint the difference between reporting bias – which affects news media globally – and promulgating violence.

This report takes five seminally violent events during the wars in Iraq and Syria post-2010 which are widely perceived to have a 'sectarian' dimension, and deconstructs how pan-Arab satellite news channels presented those events through accumulative coverage. Coverage is predominantly drawn from the most popular channels: *Al-Jazeera Arabic* and *Al-Arabiya* as well as a relative newcomer, *Al-Mayadeen*.[2] Each claims to provide objective journalism, notwithstanding their financial sponsorship from elites close to the governments of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and (probably) Iran, respectively. The rationale for choosing these channels is not to single them out as uniquely culpable but is based on their popularity; the quality of their digital archives; the evidence that their financial patrons have been heavily vested in the outcomes of particular regional conflicts; and the fact that several Arab states have banned *Al-Jazeera* on the basis that it incites sectarian violence and/or Islamist extremist militancy. While the report does not focus on *Al-Jazeera English*, which has an appreciably different editorial line from its Arabic language counterpart, where information is scarce, it does cross-reference reporting by the target channels with *Al-Jazeera English* as well as *BBC Arabic*.

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[1] 'Media Industries in the Middle East, 2016', Northwestern University in Qatar, 2016. Available at: http://www.mideastmedia.org/industry/2016/

[2] Survey information on viewership figures post-2010 is scarce and viewers are presumably reticent to admit to watching channels online in countries where they are banned from broadcasting. Overall, viewership of *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* is thought to have dropped considerably, but still numbers in the tens of millions. In 2000, Al-Jazeera claimed an estimated 50 million regular viewers. By 2013, *Al-Jazeera* cited combined polling by IPSOS and SIGMA to claim 23 million regional viewers. 'Researchers confirm Al Jazeera viewership', *Al-Jazeera Press Office*, 2013. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/pressoffice/2013/06/201364181423546953.html; in 2014, *Al-Arabiya* claimed to have a 'social footprint' of 27 million. See Ben Flanigan, 'MBC's Sheikh Waleed al-Ibrahim goes all out at Arab Media Forum', *Al-Arabiya*, 21 May 2014. Available at: https://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/television-and-radio/2014/05/21/MBC-s-Sheikh-Waleed-goes-all-out-at-media-forum-.html; Al-Mayadeen has not published public polling on viewership but had over 7. 2 million Facebook 'likes', as of March 2019. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/almayadeen/

Based on the case studies, the report finds empirical grounds for believing that all of the channels in question have, to varying degrees, served to incite violence. Overwhelmingly, however, incitement to *sectarian* violence has been a by-product of political partisanship, not a calculated objective. With a few notable exceptions, the channels have avoided manifestly abusive hate speech against particular individuals or groups. However, they have all promoted dangerous speech (i.e. speech, text, or images that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group – in this case, sect) in various contextually determined ways.[3] Most notably, they have enhanced sect group victimhood narratives and increased security dilemmas premised on sectarian identity.

The report seeks to highlight prominent tropes of pan-Arab conflict media, but the objective is not to assert any particular normative claims about the legitimacy of some manifestations of violence over others. Rather it is to better understand how discursive processes in the mainstream media can 'sectarianise' audiences and to present policy-makers with evidence that may inform decisions on how to engage with such media.

The first part of the paper introduces the concepts of hate speech and incitement to violence, and their manifestations in fringe and mainstream Arab media. It goes on to assess the intertwined political and religious worldviews of the channels in question. The second part outlines the methodological approach and the five empirical case studies of events in the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts, and draws out linguistic and thematic tropes of bias that emerge from the channels' coverage of those events. The conclusion highlights policy-relevant assessments on engagement with the Arab media emerging from the analysis.

Politics, Religion and Incitement in the Arab Media

Hate Speech and Incitement to Violence

Hate speech and incitement to violence are closely related but distinct concepts. Many countries have laws against expressions of hatred premised on particular immutable characteristics of an individual or group, including ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Article 20 of the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that 'any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law'. And the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) has formulated guidelines to help journalists to identity and avoid promoting hate speech.[4] There is, however, no universally accepted definition of hate speech, and many argue that it is inherently subjective, often undetectable to all but the victims, and as such, impossible to define.

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[3] For a full explanation of dangerous speech, see 'The Dangerous Speech Project'. Available at:
https://dangerousspeech.org/the-dangerous-speech-project-preventing-mass-violence/
[4] See '5 Point Test for Hate Speech', Ethical Journalism Network. Available at:
https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/EJN-5-point-test-for-hate-speech-English-1.pdf

Here, a minimalist understanding of 'manifest hate speech' is used to refer to overtly offensive language that vilifies individuals or groups on the basis of their sect or that openly calls for violence against them. In this context, a recognised lexicon of terms used to refer abusively to Shiʿa and Sunnis respectively has emerged. These include phrases used by Shiʿa militants to refer pejoratively to Sunnis (*Nawasib*) and to salafi-jihadists (*Takfiriyyin* – those who pronounce others to be unbelievers, sometimes rendered in an Anglicised fashion as 'Takfiris') and by Sunni salafi-jihadists to refer to Shiʿa (such as *Rawafid* and *Nusayriyyin*); to Iranians (such as *Majus* and *Safawiyyin*); and to Hezbollah (*Hizb al-Shaytan* and *Hizb al-Lat*). Salafi-jihadists also refer to those whom they hold to be 'unbelievers' and thus deserving of death in offensive terms including pigs, dogs, apostates, infidels and polytheists.[5]

Incitement to violence is frequently included in definitions of hate speech. Like hate speech, its definition is also problematic. In this report, however, it is used to encompass a range of techniques or tropes that are not necessarily overtly abusive and may include contextually situated inferences, selective use of information, emphasis of victimhood narratives, and provocative use of imagery that glorifies violence.

Over the past few decades, and in light of the sectarian dimensions to much of the violence in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon, fringe but also mainstream Arab media outlets have faced widespread criticism for inciting violence along sectarian lines.[6] Several new or previously quietist privately owned religious channels have undergone 'speedy politicisation.'[7] Presenters on religious channels such as the British broadcast Iraqi Shiʿa channel *Fadak*, the Saudi Sunni *Wesal*, and the Egyptian *Al-Nas* and *Al-Rahma*, have regularly used incendiary and hateful rhetoric against other sects. By and large, however, the latter do not appeal to the majority of the Arab public.

Charges levied against satellite news channels are of greater consequence considering their mainstream appeal – which until recently was not dictated by nationality or sect. Several publicised instances of *Al-Jazeera* presenters using hate speech and/or giving a platform to manifestly sectarian views have particularly fed these accusations.[8] Most prominent was

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[5] See Aaron Zelin & Phillip Smyth, 'The vocabulary of sectarianism', *Foreign Policy* 29 (2014).
[6] See, for instance, Waleed Zahra, 'Ini Akrahek: Khitāb al-Karahiya wa-l-Taʾifiyya fi'l-Rabiʿa al-ʿArabi' ('I Hate You: Hate Speech and Sectarianism in the Arab Spring'), Centre for Defending Freedom of Journalists, 2014; Magda Abu Fadil, 'Arab Media Targets Hate Speech', *Huffington Post*, 15 November 2014. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/magda-abufadil/beirut-seminar-targets-ar_b_6163680.html; *BBC Arabic* documentary 'Athir al-Karahiya. ʿAn Al-Taḥrid al-Madhhabi fi-l-Qanawāt al-ʿArabiyya' ('Provoking Hate: Sectarian Incitement on Arab Channels'). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_NKgXGcxX8
[7] Khaled Hroub, *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2012), p. 283.
[8] In 2013, *Al-Jazeera* ran a series of interviews by Tayser Alluni with militant Syrian rebel leaders including the leaders of Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam and Jabhat al-Nusra who had publicly invoked sectarian violence in other forums. *Al-Jazeera* aired further interviews with Jabhat al-Nusra's leader in 2015 and 2016. Available at:
https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2013/6/21/ج٦-المسلحة-المعارضة-رموز-سلسلة-علوش-زهران;
https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2013/6/11/ج٧-المسلحة-المعارضة-رموز-سلسلة-عبود-حسان;
https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/specialinterview/2016/9/17/الأسد-نظام-مع-متواطنتان-وروسيا-أميركا-الجولاني

an episode of the *Al-Jazeera* flagship show 'al-Itijah al-Muʿakis' in May 2015, in which the moderator, Faysal Al-Qassem, asked – only questionably rhetorically – whether Alawites had invited genocide upon themselves in Syria.[9] Moreover, post-2010, several *Al-Jazeera* correspondents have used sectarian hate speech in a supposedly private capacity on social media.[10] These examples are of course significant. However, the premise of this paper is that incitement to violence is primarily achieved not through use of manifest hate speech but through accumulative emotionally charged reporting, and is therefore more meaning-fully understood in terms of the channels' broader framing of events.

The Politics of Arab Satellite News Channels

Prior to the Arab uprisings, the leading pan-Arab satellite news channels, *Al-Jazeera Arabic* and *Al-Arabiya*, benefited from a relative lack of state control over their content when compared with terrestrial news channels. Like the majority of Arab news outlets, both are funded by politically-aligned individuals or elites. *Al-Jazeera* was launched in Doha in 1996 with funding from the Emir of Qatar, while *Al-Arabiya* was launched in Dubai in 2003 by the *Middle East Broadcasting Corporation* (MBC) under the ownership of Walid al-Ibrahim, a Saudi businessman and brother-in law to the late King Fahd.

While the channels avoided criticism of Qatari and Saudi politics respectively, they had leeway to address thorny regional political issues. *Al-Jazeera* in particular took advantage by 'giving a voice to the voiceless', frequently at the expense of establishment authority. This encouraged a view that pan-Arab channels could create a public sphere in which individuals could freely discuss societal problems and thereby influence political action.[11] *Al-Arabiya*'s editorial line has always been more muted; in 2008 its director told the *New York Times* that it was established 'to cure Arab television of its penchant for radical poli-tics and violence.'[12] Nonetheless, both channels provided relatively balanced coverage of regional events.

Following the Arab uprisings, both Doha and Riyadh adopted more aggressively interven-tionist foreign policies, and the channels became more obvious tools of those policies. In 2012, a group of former *Al-Jazeera Arabic* staff launched *Al-Mayadeen* in Beirut, citing disil-lusionment with *Al-Jazeera*'s 'unbalanced coverage' of the Syrian conflict as their principle

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[9] 'al-Itijah al-Muʿakis', *Al-Jazeera*, 5 May 2015. Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vieBO7BsZM8
[10] In June 2014, for instance, after the Iraqi army fled ISIL militants in Mosul and the government sought US air support, the *Al-Jazeera Arabic* Iraqi affairs editor, Hamed Hadid, tweeted 'After their rats flee Sunni attacks, Safavids rush to their Crusader Masters to strike the Mujahidin'.
[11] Mark Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Mohammed El-Nawawy & Leo Gher, 'Al Jazeera: Bridging the East-West Gap through Public Discourse and Media Diplomacy', *Journal of Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 10: 2 (2003); Mohamed Zayani, 'Arab satellite television and politics in the Middle East' (Georgetown Digital Repository, 2004).
[12] Robert Worth, 'A Voice of Moderation Helps Transform Arab Media', *New York Times*, 4 January 2008.

reason for splitting.[13] *Al-Mayadeen* quickly became associated with a pro-Iranian, pro-Hezbollah and pro-Assad position. It has never officially revealed its funding sources, but is mooted to be backed by Iranian money, and its editorial line has broadly corresponded to Tehran's foreign policy.[14]

Geopolitical objectives have prompted Qatar and Saudi Arabia to financially support militant Sunni groups espousing sectarian violence against Shiʿa and/or other religious minorities.[15] Meanwhile, Iran, often acting through Hezbollah, has trained, funded, and fought alongside Shiʿa militant groups in Iraq and Syria.[16] However, none of the patrons has exclusively backed groups espousing sectarian violence. Qatar has broadly promoted the Muslim Brotherhood across the region, which in most of its iterations accepts religious pluralism; Saudi Arabia, fashioning itself as the regional leader of the 'moderates' has attempted to back secular and/or tribal factions in Syria and Iraq; and Iran has forged alliances with minorities in different parts of the region including Kurds and Christians, as well as attempting to continue patronage of Sunni Palestinian resistance groups. The channels' worldviews have thus encompassed various political positions and are subject to change. Indeed, post-2017, transnational sectarian rhetoric has arguably receded in keeping with changing geo-political priorities.[17]

Since June 2017, *Al-Jazeera* has been at the centre of a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and its regional allies.[18] Citing Qatar's regional sponsorship of terrorism, the Saudi-led bloc demanded that Qatar comply with thirteen demands, including severing all ties to 'terrorist' organisations, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah; and closing *Al-Jazeera* and its affiliate stations.[19] Qatar's rejection of the ultimatum led to an ongoing regional diplomatic and trade blockade on it and bans on watching *Al-Jazeera* in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Iraq and Syria had already revoked the operating licences of *Al-Jazeera*; Syria has also banned *Al-Arabiya* from operating, and the Egyptian-owned Nilesat and Saudi-controlled Arabsat satellite companies have both banned Al-*Mayadeen*, forcing it to rely on its digital platforms. Added to this, in November 2017, Waleed al-Ibrahim was detained for several months on the orders of the Saudi Crown Prince on allegations of corruption. On his release in January, he signed majority control of *MBC* over to the Saudi government's investment fund, increasing official state control over *Al-Arabiya*.[20]

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[13] Zeina Karam, 'New Pan-Arab Satellite Channel Goes on Air', *Associated Press*, 6 November 2012.

[14] *Al-Mayadeen*'s publicly available company records list only Ghassan Ben Jiddo (former head of *Al-Jazeera*'s Tehran bureau), his son, and his wife, Nada Ghaemmaghami al-Najafi, who is Iranian, as shareholders. Available at: http://cr.justice.gov.lb/search/result.aspx?id=1000110090

[15] Chris Phillips, 'Gulf Actors and the Syria Crisis', in Philips et al., *The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States* (London: LSE Middle East Centre Collected Papers, Volume 1, 2015), pp. 41-51.

[16] Brian Katz, 'Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East', *CSIS Briefs* (2018). Available at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east

[17] Hassan Hassan, 'The Eclipse of Sectarianism', *The Atlantic*, 2018. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/end-sectarian-violence-middle-east/573580/

[18] Gregg Carlstrom, 'What's the Problem with Al-Jazeera?', *The Atlantic*, 24 June 2017.

[19] 'The 13 demands on Qatar from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt', *The National*, 23 June 2017.

[20] Jamal Khashoggi, 'Saudi Arabia's crown prince already controlled the nation's media. Now he's squeezing it even further', *Washington Post*, 7 February 2018.

The hyper-politicisation of Arab satellite news has injected additional political dimensions into claims that any given channel is promoting 'sectarian violence'. In some cases there are, however, solid grounds for such accusations.

Religious Brand Management

Religion is infused into society and politics in the Arab world and, unsurprisingly, religious discourse has filtered into the content of the mainstream satellite news media.[21] Although receptive to the views of diverse parties, *Al-Jazeera Arabic* has always been associated with pan-Islamism. Prior to the Arab uprisings, one of *Al-Jazeera*'s central claims to fame was the hugely popular 'Al-Shariʿa wa'l-Hayat', a weekly show normally featuring the Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The programme dealt with themes pertaining to Islam, inviting viewers to call in with questions.

Qaradawi, an ideologue for the Muslim Brotherhood, tended to promote cooperation between sects.[22] This position was abruptly reversed in June 2013 after Hezbollah's victory over rebel fighters in Qusayr, western Syria. Qaradawi denounced Hezbollah as the party of Satan, announced that Shiʿa were bigger infidels than Jews or Christians, and called on Sunnis everywhere to support the rebels in Syria. In fact, Qaradawi's explicitly anti-Shiʿa views were initially aired in an *Al-Arabiya* interview, not during 'Al-Shariʿa wa'l-Hayat', but his image as a moderate cleric was tarnished, and the programme was axed later that year.[23] The show was not replaced, but *Al-Jazeera* continued to feature Islamist scholars (often associated with the Muslim Brotherhood) in other news and discussion programmes.

Al-Arabiya has dedicated less space to airing religious discourse and has never had a religious show parallel to 'Al-Shariʿa wa'l-Hayat'. It has, however, interviewed and hosted Muslim scholars, some of whom have voiced extremist sectarian views in other forums, including Saudi-owned media. Since the blockade on Qatar, however, both *Al-Jazeera Arabic* and *Al-Arabiya* have dedicated considerable airtime to emphasising the alleged hypocrisy of the Saudi and Qatari state positions on Islam, respectively.[24]

For its part, *Al-Mayadeen*'s worldview embraces Islamic culture but opposes both Qatari and Saudi projections of Sunni Islamism.[25] *Al-Mayadeen*'s broadcasting reflects Lebanese society where Hezbollah (a Shiʿa movement) is politically allied with Christian factions, and the Syrian conflict where the Alawite ruling elite has attempted to co-opt Christian

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[21] Hroub, *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East*, p. 7.

[22] Mohammad Ayish, 'Religious Broadcasting on Mainstream Channels – Al-Jazeera, MBC & Dubai', in Hroub, *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East*, p. 13–33.

[23] 'Sheikh Qaradawi to Al-Arabiya: Hezbollah does not represent the true Islam'. Available at: https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/2013/06/09/الشيخ-القرضاوي-لـ-العربية-الجهاد-مطلوب-في-سوريا.html

[24] See, for instance, *Al-Jazeera*, 'Behind the News: Did Saudi Arabia Spread Wahhabi thought to Satisfy the West?' Available at:
https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/behindthenews/2018/3/25/هل-نشرت-السعودية-الفكر-الوهابي-إرضاء-للغرب;
and *Al-Arabiya*, 'Qatar and Support for Al-Qaradawi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi terrorism'. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwKz4BNppW4

[25] Christine Crone, 'Producing The New Regressive Left: The Case of the Pan-Arab News TV station al-Mayadeen', PhD diss., (Københavns Universitet, Det Humanistiske Fakultet, 2017); p. 76.

minorities. In the weekly discussion show 'Alif Lam Mim', Algerian Sunni journalist Yahya Abu Zakaria addresses issues pertaining to Muslims, loudly denouncing sectarian discrimination against Shiʿa, whilst simultaneously delivering fiery condemnations of Israel and the West. In 'Ajras al-Mashraq' ('Bells of the Levant'), Maronite presenter Ghassan Shami discusses regional issues pertaining to Christians. The Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Badr Ad-Din Hassoun, who is politically aligned with the Assad regime, is also a frequent guest on *Al-Mayadeen*, where he preaches abstract notions of religious tolerance.

Overall, each channel has tended to air messages of religious tolerance and moderation, while contributing towards knowledge production on the nature of sectarianism in the region through sophisticated analyses. But the abstract promotion of tolerance belies indications that it is the circumstances of particular events that elicit incitement to violence.

Empirical Analysis

Methods

Hate speech in both traditional and social media has generated considerable research in recent years. Many studies identify predetermined key phrases deemed hateful in a set of texts and/or transcribed material. Sophisticated data analysis tools have progressively improved the accuracy of automated hate speech detection.[26] And, in the context of inciting sectarian violence between Muslims, several studies have used the terms discussed above – which are employed by salafi-jihadists to refer to their enemies – as the basis for data analysis searches. Nonetheless, quantitative approaches do not detect how hateful intentions or value-laden terminology emerge organically and contextually. Moreover, for the most part, only one particular attribute of the text or broadcast is subject to interrogation, making it difficult to capture the overall context or framing of the event.

The media framing concept recognises that there are multiple ways in which to cultivate audience reactions, including a proclivity to violence.[27] These include: 1) direct use of manifestly hateful language; 2) granting a frequent platform to proponents of extremist views (whether or not they actually promote extremist views on air); 3) repeating or suppressing certain details; 4) showing imagery pointing to or denying evidence of atrocities; and 5) choosing language that subtly bestows or denies legitimacy to certain actions. It is the ensemble of these tropes that frames any given issue rather than any single trope in isolation.

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[26] See, for instance, Tom De Smedt et al., 'Automatic Detection of Online Jihadist Hate Speech', *Computational Linguistics & Pyscholinguistics Technical Report Series*, CTRS-007, February 2018. Available at: https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1803/1803.04596.pdf

[27] According to Robert Entman, 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.' Entman, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43: 4 (1993), p. 51–8.

Guided by the criteria above, this qualitative analysis examines how the channels framed five events involving inter-sect violence during the conflicts in Iraq and Syria between 2013 and 2017, whether or not sect was in fact the determining feature of violence. From hundreds of events that could have been analysed, these cases were chosen because they represent different types of violence involving different actors at different stages of the conflicts in both countries, which accordingly met with quite different media responses.

In each case, the channels' online search engines were used to retrieve televisual and textual results featuring the name of the location where the event took place over a 10-day (or in one case, a 20-day) period. The same searches were conducted for each channel on YouTube and Google. The searches retrieved a combination of news articles and clips, programme discussions and opinion articles. The latter are included despite the websites' disclaimers that they represent the author's view alone, because they contribute to the collective coverage of the issue. Each entry was logged and examined using deductive and inductive approaches. The findings below are based on these results, with the caveat that it was not possible to verify what content had been removed from channel websites. *Al-Arabiya* removes content from its website after 5 years and as a result searches for the channel's coverage of the Hawija violence discussed below were entirely reliant on features retrievable through Google and YouTube.

Case Studies:

Iraq:

- **Hawija, 2013:** On 23 April 2013, Iraqi security forces raided a Sunni protest camp in the town of Hawija, Kirkuk province. Hundreds of residents had been staging a sit-in over the preceding four months, parallel to sit-ins in other predominantly Sunni towns, protesting what they called the policies of exclusion and marginalisation pursued by Nouri al-Maliki's government against Sunnis. 27–50 people were killed in the raid, and over 70 injured (predominantly protestors). The event triggered a number of retaliatory killings and is broadly portrayed as signalling Iraq's return to a state of sectarian conflict. Days after the raid, the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission revoked the operating licences of *Al-Jazeera* as well as nine other Iraqi terrestrial channels on the grounds that their coverage of Hawija incited sectarian violence.[28]

- **Camp Speicher, 2014:** On 12 June 2014, two days after overrunning Iraq's second city Mosul, members of ISIL (hitherto identified by the Arabic acronym, 'Daesh') killed between 1,500 and 1,900 unarmed Iraqi air force cadets from Camp Speicher in Tikrit.[29] The cadets had been given a 15 day rest period and were looking for transport on the highway when Daesh militants in buses kidnapped them at gunpoint. Survivors testify that the perpetrators singled out Shiʿa from Sunni recruits, loaded the Shiʿa onto

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[28] Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki also threatened to close *Al-Arabiya* in June 2014, citing its 'biased' coverage.

[29] According to the Iraqi government, former members of the Baath party were also amongst the perpetrators.

trucks, took them to the desert and shot them in mass graves. While Daesh released a video of the killings on social media, the Ministry of Defence was unable to confirm the details of the victims, which only began to emerge in subsequent weeks.

- **Fallujah, 2016:** Between May and June 2016, Iraqi security forces battled to oust Daesh militants from Fallujah and regain control over the city. They were accompanied by predominantly Shiʿa volunteer Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), notwithstanding calls by international rights groups for the PMF not to be involved due to evidence of human rights violations committed by constituent militias against Sunni civilians during the liberation of Tikrit in 2015.

Syria:

- **Hatla, 2013:** On 11 June 2013, Syrian rebel forces including a group from the Syrian branch of Al-Qa'eda, Jabhat al-Nusra, attacked Hatla in Deir al-Zour, a mixed Sunni and Shiʿa village. Some of the Shiʿa villagers had been fighting for the Assad regime and had attacked a rebel position the previous day. The rebels burned Shiʿa homes in Hatla and killed between 25 and 65 Shiʿa residents, including a number of unarmed women and children. Shortly afterwards, an unverified video was released online by Jabhat al-Nusra, in which militants were seen exhibiting the bodies of some of the male victims whilst making hateful sectarian remarks.

- **Besieged Villages of Foʿa, Kefraya, Madaya & Zabadani, April 2017:** Throughout the war, pro-government and rebel forces have besieged predominantly Sunni and Shiʿa towns, respectively. In April 2017, Hezbollah and the opposition group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) signed the Iran and Qatar-brokered 'four towns agreement'. It entailed what international observers described as a semi-compulsory evacuation of thousands of pro-regime militants and civilians from the Shiʿa villages Foʿa and Kefraya in rebel-held Idlib, in exchange for the evacuation of rebel militants and families from the Sunni towns of Madaya and Zabadani north of Damascus, which were besieged by government forces. On 15 April, a vehicle-borne suicide bomber in the Rashidin district of Aleppo killed 126 and injured around 200 (Shiʿa) evacuees who had left Foʿa and Kefraya on buses and were waiting in transit.

Table 1: Coverage of Key Events by Each Channel

Location & Period	Number of Features Retrieved for Channels[30]		
	Al-Jazeera Arabic	*Al-Arabiya*	*Al-Mayadeen*
Hawija 23 April – 2 May 2013	54 including 7 discussion programmes, 16 reports/news bulletin extracts & 31 stand-alone articles	15 incl. 9 visual reports/ news bulletin extracts with accompanying articles & 6 stand-alone articles	20 incl. 3 reports, 1 discussion programme, 6 articles & 10 breaking news headlines
Speicher 22 August – 10 September 2014	5 all stand-alone articles	24 incl. 1 report, 2 articles with video footage, 5 opinion articles & 16 stand-alone articles	12 incl.5 news clips/ reports, 4 stand-alone articles & 3 headlines
Fallujah 26 May – 4 June 2016 (latter stages of the battle in West Mosul)	98 incl. 8 programmes, 32 reports with articles & 58 stand-alone articles	57 incl. 19 reports/ programmes & 38 articles, including 15 opinion articles	30 incl. 1 discussion programme, 16 news clips/reports with articles & 13 stand-alone articles
Hatla 11–21 June 2013	1 stand-alone article	1 stand-alone article	3 stand-alone articles
Foʾa, **Kefraya**, **Zebadani**, **Madaya** & **Rashidin**[31] 14–24 April 2017	15 incl. 8 news reports and/or video footage & 7 stand-alone articles	21 incl. 10 news report clips with articles & 21 stand-alone articles	20 incl. 1 programme, 5 reports, 10 headlines & 4 articles

Findings: Political Bias and/or Sectarian Incitement?

Overall, the channels' framing of the incidents reflect Qatari, Saudi and Iranian/Hezbollah foreign policies, respectively.

In Iraq, Iran has politically supported the government (formed through a system of sectarian apportionment in which Shiʿa political groups dominate), and funds a number of the PMF. In Syria, Iran and Hezbollah have been the Assad government's principle allies. Accordingly, in Hawija and Fallujah, *Al-Mayadeen*'s coverage relied largely on official accounts of events, giving limited coverage to dissenting views. In Fallujah, *Al-Mayadeen* had reporters embedded with the Iraqi military and the PMF and covered the operation

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[30]   While the number and type of results retrieved are listed, since it was impossible to verify what content had been removed from the websites, or whether all results were detected by the search engines, no attempt is made to extrapolate findings based on quantitative data.

[31]   Results refer to any or all of the towns in question.

from their perspective. In Syria, *Al-Mayadeen* similarly had reporters embedded with Syrian government forces, and reported on the four towns agreement from the perspective of Foʿa and Kefraya residents arriving in government-held Aleppo, and Syrian forces entering the towns of Zebdani and Madaya after the evacuation of families and opposition militants.

Conversely, neither the Saudi nor Qatari government have obvious military interests in Iraq, though both are reputed to have cultivated political and economic relations with Sunni political, tribal and business figures. In covering Hawija, *Al-Jazeera* gave extensive airtime to grievances by Sunni protestors in Kirkuk and Anbar against the Iraqi government. *Al-Arabiya*'s coverage of the protestors was less extensive but also broadly sympathetic. However, with increased Iranian involvement in Iraq in Fallujah in 2016, *Al-Arabiya* gave frequent platforms to anti-Iranian views, largely via opinion articles posted to the website.

In Syria, Qatar is believed to have funded various opposition militant groups including Ahrar al-Sham, while Saudi Arabia initially funded others including Jaysh al-Islam (whose leader had delivered sectarian hate speeches to followers) but distanced itself from other sectarian extremist groups including Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra (which later became HTS). And, while both channels' editorial lines were critical of the Syrian government and its allies, their positions on opposition groups were mixed. By the time of the 2017 four towns agreement signed by HTS (which controlled most of Idlib), *Al-Arabiya*'s reporting conveyed clear hostility towards the 'shadow state' which had engulfed the opposition.

The Hatla massacre passed with little comment by any of the channels (according to the results retrieved). Surprisingly few *Al-Mayadeen* or *Al-Jazeera* results were retrieved about the Camp Speicher mass murder either. In *Al-Mayadeen*'s case, underreporting may reflect the Iraqi government's silence on the incident; in *Al-Jazeera*'s case, the channel's previous ambivalence on Daesh's seizure of Mosul days before may have affected its response to Speicher. It is, however, also feasible that coverage was removed. All of the channels subsequently described Speicher as a 'crime' and/or a 'massacre', and there was little question that Daesh was responsible. During the period under review, *Al-Arabiya* published a series of articles strongly condemning Daesh's horrific crimes.[32] Even so, it also discussed the event mostly in light of victims' families' anger at lack of information from the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, thereby deflecting blame onto the government.

Overall, evidence of the channels' political biases vis-à-vis the events studied was far more apparent than evidence of sectarian incitement per se. The section below assesses the channels' relative roles in promoting sectarian violence in three spheres.

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[32] See, for example:
https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2014/09/06/ةلجد-رهن-ىلع-مهثثج-وفطت-ركيابس-اياحض.html

1. Broadcasting views or imagery promoting sectarian violence: Within the scope of the case studies, none of the channels' presenters used manifest sectarian hate speech, which would constitute the clearest evidence of promoting sectarian violence.

Overall, *Al-Jazeera* dedicated more coverage to the views of groups calling for and/or practicing violence for whom Sunni identity was a defining feature than either *Al-Mayadeen* or *Al-Arabiya*. Coverage took the form of interviews, quotations, or video footage. Groups included the protestors in Hawija and the Sunni provinces in 2013 and members of HTS in the four towns agreement. Similarly, *Al-Mayadeen* dedicated more coverage than *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* to conveying the views of militant groups for whom Shiʿa identity was a defining feature – primarily the PMF in Fallujah in 2013. *Al-Arabiya* featured fewer interviews or citations with any militant group or individual espousing violence, relying more overall on official sources and international agencies.

None of the individuals interviewed or cited by any channel in the results retrieved explicitly justified violence on a sectarian basis. But some of the groups they belong to are known to have promoted violence premised on sectarian sentiments in other forums, and viewers' knowledge of this would inevitably affect how they understand reporting. In the context of Hawija, *Al-Jazeera* quoted the Association for Muslim Scholars (AMS) saying 'Maliki and his soldiers are continuing to implement the agenda of the Wali Faqih [the theocratic system of government in Iran] based on ethnic and sectarian cleansing', and that 'Iraqis should realise that Maliki has declared war on them, and that he will not stop unless repelled.' While this implicit call to violence is nominally directed at all Iraqis, to anyone familiar with the political context, it is meant specifically for Sunnis.[33] AMS are a polemical Sunni group, previously led by Harith al-Dari. In 2006 the Iraqi government issued an arrest warrant for al-Dari on charges of inciting sectarian violence. In 2010, the US treasury designated his son Muthana a sponsor of terrorism for funding and equipping al-Qaeda in Iraq.[34] Muthana subsequently took over the leadership of AMS and in 2016 *Al-Jazeera* interviewed Muthana on the Fallujah campaign, who claimed that the operation's goal was 'to eradicate the resistance in Iraq in support of an Iranian–American project in the region.'[35]

Each channel used footage produced by their own cameras, opposition militant groups including Daesh, government agencies and citizen journalists. This included multiple scenes of armed fighting and rocket launches. No channel showed Jabhat al-Nusra footage of the Hatla killings, but Al-Arabiya did show a brief excerpt from Daesh's footage of the Speicher massacre.[36] During the four towns agreement, Al-Mayadeen aired a video by

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[33] 'Burial of Hawija dead amidst tension and clashes', *Al-Jazeera*. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/4/24/تشييع-قتلى-الحويجة-وسط-توتر-واشتباكات

[34] 'Treasury Targets Al Qaida in Iraq', 25 March 2010. Available at: https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg612.aspx

[35] 'Al-Dari: the Fallujah War Aims to Eradicate the Resistance'. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/5/29/الضاري-حرب-الفلوجة-تهدف-لاستئصال-المقاومة; the full length interview with al-Dari was published soon afterwards on 'Without Bounds'. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.net/programs%2Fwithoutbounds%2F2016%2F6%2F19%2Fحرب-الفلوجة-وتداعياتها-على-مستقبل-العراق

[36] 'Iraqi Soldier Recounts How he Escaped Speicher Massacre'. Available at: https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/alarabiya-today/2014/09/07/جندي-عراقي-يروي-قصة-نجاته-من-مجزرة-سبايكر.html

'Jannat Hoda' entitled 'last moments before the suicide bomber detonates amid the children of Foʿa and Kefraya', appearing to show the deliberate targeting of children receiving humanitarian supplies in Rashidin.[37] All channels showed footage of dead and injured people in Hawija and Rashidin, but avoided close-up shots of the dead.[38]

2. Compounding Sectarian Narratives: Coverage of Hawija and its aftermath shows how the media can play into escalating sectarian rhetoric. Protesters consistently expressed their grievances in terms of their democratic constitutional rights as Iraqis. Similarly, their objections to the army's presence in the vicinity of the protests were not premised upon sectarian grounds (the majority of the army is Shiʿa) but on the assertion that the army is an apparatus for external defence which should not be used against the citizenry.

Al-Jazeera's reporting of Hawija and the parallel protests in the predominantly Sunni towns of Fallujah, Mosul, Ramadi and Suleyman Bek highlighted this framing of events, mostly by giving protestors extensive airtime to express their views. In one report, an *Al-Jazeera* correspondent refers to the population of Mosul staging a strike in response to the 'revolutionary appeal', thereby casting their demands in the same light as 'revolutionaries' in other Arab Spring countries who demanded their rights from oppressive governments.[39]

However, Nouri al-Maliki's warning to Iraqis and, explicitly, to Sunni sheikhs after the raid, to avoid being dragged back into sectarian *fitna* (civil insurrection) by '*mandassin*' (agents provocateurs), served to reframe the issue as one of sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shiʿa. Critics, including several *Al-Jazeera* guests, identified Maliki's speech as a threat designed to secure acquiescence for the government.[40] All three channels ostensibly rejected sectarian positions, and only rarely referred to protestors as Sunnis (tending to refer to them instead as tribesmen). In fact, other international media providers, including *BBC Arabic*, were more prone to 'sect-coding' with respect to Hawija, and Iraqi affairs in general, than the channels under scrutiny. *BBC Arabic*'s consistent identification of Iraqis by sect post-2004 can be seen as a simple device for the benefit of audiences who may be unfamiliar with the country's political demography, but it increases the risk of sect becoming an overriding causal explanation. At the same time, however, following Maliki's speech on Hawija, there was a marked rise in media discussion by all channels of the topic of sectarian violence and the nature of the presumed foreign sectarian agenda.[41]

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[37] 'The last moments before the suicide bomber detonates amidst children of Kefraya and Foʿa', *Al-Mayadeen*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4TnlN2M2Z0

[38] See, for example:
https://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2017/4/17/تفجير-الراشدين-بحلب-فتش-عن-المستفيد

[39] 'Iraqi Forces Raid Hawija, and Civil Insurrection Continues'. Available at:
https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/4/23/قوات-عراقية-تقتحم-الحويجة-واستمرار-العصيان

[40] 'Maliki warns against sectarian strife'. Available at:
https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/behindthenews/2013/4/28/تحذير-المالكي-من-فتنة-طائفية

[41] See, for example: http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/644180/_27-04-2013; *Al-Arabiya* featured several opinion articles taken from Arab papers that manifest strong criticism of Iranian ambitions in the region. See, for example: https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/politics/2013/04/28/الحويجة-القصير-وقصة-استتباع-العراق.html; and https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/politics/2013/04/25/الهجوم-المضاد-من-سوريا-إلى-العراق.html

3. Selective Coverage: Sect-Based Aggressor & Victimhood Narratives: The collective coverage of each of the channels condemned sectarian violence in principle. But like the belligerents, the channels engaged in 'blame games' by consistently emphasising evidence or claims that political/military groups whom their financial sponsors opposed were victimising communities along sectarian lines. At the same time, where relevant, they ignored or undermined claims that groups their sponsors favoured were guilty of sectarian violence.

Hence, *Al-Jazeera* and to a lesser extent *Al-Arabiya* emphasised views expressed by Sunni protestors in Hawija, that the Shia government was deliberately excluding Sunnis from the political process and even subjecting them to physical abuse based on their sect. While the numbers killed and injured remained unclear for days, both channels cited sources who claimed fatalities were about twice as high as the MoD figure of 27.[42] *Al-Jazeera* repeated that some of the victims' families claimed Iraqi forces had initially wounded them, but then detained and later killed them, thereby casting the army as predatory rather than defensive.

Amidst the Fallujah campaign, *Al-Mayadeen* featured a number of interviews with Iraqi military and PMF leaders including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (head of the PMF), Jaaffar al-Husseini (spokesperson for Kata'ib Hezbollah) and Hadi al-Ameri (head of the Badr Brigade) who all affirmed their high ethical standards, support for the Iraqi army and cooperation with local (Sunni) tribes for the good of the civilian population. Only one *Al-Mayadeen* result acknowledged the possibility that certain PMF were indeed guilty of human rights violations: an episode of the weekly 'Countdown', in which the presenter suggested to one of her guests that such crimes may have occurred. And, in an apparent bid to undercut criticisms of the PMF by *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*, *Al-Mayadeen* posted an opinion piece attacking the 'defamation battle launched by the international Arab axis supporting Takfiri terrorism'.[43]

By contrast, while neither *Al-Arabiya* nor *Al-Jazeera* endorsed Daesh's oppressive rule of Fallujah, both emphasised that civilians' plight was equally due to the Iraqi forces' siege on the city and 'indiscriminate' shelling of residential areas.[44] They refer to the 'liberation' of Fallujah in inverted commas, thereby questioning the validity of the description.[45] And they report repeatedly on allegations and evidence of human rights abuses by PMF and other Iraqi armed forces.[46] *Al-Arabiya* shows 'leaked' photos of PMF leaders, including

[42] See, for example: http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/4/23/قتلى-باشتباكات-مع-محتجين-بالحويجة; in one picture posted on the *Al-Jazeera* website, mobile footage of Hawija shows protestors leaving the square with a stretcher in tow. The caption reads 'almost a hundred killed and 200 injured in army raid on protest in Hawija and the aftermath of the raid'. Available at: http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/4/25/عشرات-القتلى-بتصاعد-العنف-انتقاما-للحويجة

[43] Ayad Harfush, 'Fallujah: the liberation battle and the defamation battle'. Available at: http://www.almayadeen.net/articles/blog/809608/الفلوجة--معركة-التحرير-ومعركة-التجريح

[44] See, for example: https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2016/06/01/اليمن.html; and: http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/alarabiya-today/2016/06/02/-الفلوجة-ضحية-داعش-والحشد-والصمت-الدولي.html

[45] See, for example: https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/5/29/العبادي-الجيش-سيدخل-الفلوجة-خلال-يومين

[46] See, for example: https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/6/3/مئات-العائلات-العراقية-تفر-من-معارك-الفلوجة

Badr Brigade leader Hadi al-Ameri, wearing federal police uniforms.[47] *Al-Jazeera* reported that the PMF describe the people of Fallujah as 'a well of terrorism and a cancerous tumour that must be eradicated', who have abused citizens for the sole sin of 'being Sunni', and featured interviews with civilians who had escaped Fallujah and claimed mistreatment at PMF hands.[48]

Al-Arabiya coverage of Fallujah focused on alleged Iranian sectarian imperialism. 'Irani-an-funded militias', as the channel referred collectively to the PMF, were the main tools. This impression is built through quotes from prominent Sunni voices including Iraq's Grand Mufti, who warns that Fallujah comprises a sectarian revenge operation by Iranian militias;[49] and multiple opinion articles about 'hateful sectarian militias'[50] which note that 'the Shiʿa militias are pursuing ethnic cleansing'; 'the first target in the war on terrorism is the Sunnis'[51] and 'the Sunni Arab community [in Iraq and Syria] is being subjected to a major massacre.'[52] A piece by *Al-Arabiya*'s former director general claims that 'extremist Shiʿa came to take part in the operations of sectarian incitement, along with the Iranian General Soleimani who made the siege of Fallujah a symbol for the exploits of the Revolutionary Guard...'.[53]

Al-Arabiya was similarly critical of Iran's role in the four towns agreement and repeatedly reported on forced evacuations producing a new sectarian-based map in Syria. *Al-Jazeera* sidelined the agreement's potential humanitarian transgressions – presumably due to Qatar's role in brokering it. All channels emphasised condemnation of the 'terrorist' suicide bombing in Rashidin in 2017. *Al-Mayadeen*'s reporting took for granted that an opposition faction was responsible. In an episode of 'Alif Lam Mim', presenter Abu Yahia Zakaria condemned 'the new *Jahiliyyin* ['*Jahiliyya*' is the age of ignorance before Islam], their Takfiri jurisprudence and their culture of genocide', for a series of massacres including those connected to Karada and Speicher in Iraq, and Foʿa and Kefraya [i.e. Rashidin] in Syria.[54] Meanwhile, *Al-Jazeera* reporters stressed that the perpetrators had not been identified and featured an interview with an opposition forces coordinator who maintained that the regime was capable of perpetrating such an attack to distract international attention from its recent use of chemical weapons in Khan Sheikhoun.[55]

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[47] 'Leaked Photos from Iraq: popular militia leaders in police clothes'. Available at: https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2016/06/02/صور-مسربة-من-العراق-قيادات-بالحشد-الشعبي-بزي-الشرطة.html
[48] See: https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/5/27/أميركا-ندرك-محاذير-الطائفية-بمعركتي-الفلوجة-والرقة and https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/5/30/نازحو-الفلوجة-يشتكون-من-انتهاكات-الحشد
[49] See video report:
https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2016/05/31/القوات-العراقية-على-مشارف-حي-الشهداء-في-الفلوجة
[50] Mishari al-Dhaydi, 'After Fallujah?' Available at:
https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/politics/2016/06/01/ما-بعد-الفلوجة.html
[51] Mutlaq al-Mtairi, 'Will Iran send Daesh to perform the Haj?' Available at:
https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/saudi-today/2016/06/04/هل-سترسل-إيران-دواعش-للحج؟.html
[52] Hazem Saghieh, 'The Humiliation of the Sunni Arabs'. Available at:
https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/politics/2016/06/04/إذلال-السنية-العربية-.html
[53] 'Abdulrahman al-Rashed, 'They're all in Fallujah'. Available at:
https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/politics/2016/06/03/جميعهم-في-الفلوجة.html
[54] 'Alif Lam Mim'. Available at: http://www.almayadeen.net/episodes/743677/فقه-الإبادة-ونكث-العهود
[55] 'Al-Rashidin Explosion in Aleppo: Search for the Beneficiaries'. Available at:
https://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2017/4/17/تفجير-الراشدين-بحلب-فتش-عن-المستفيد

That selective coverage has a powerful bearing on the impression created is clearly demonstrated in the reporting on Hatla. Overall, none of the channels reported much on the event. As with much of the violence in the Syrian war, journalists' access to the area was clearly restricted and details are difficult to ascertain. *Al-Mayadeen* reported that Syrian opposition websites had posted a video of armed opposition elements celebrating and boasting after storming Hatla and killing a number of people, including women and children. Days later *Al-Mayadeen* noted that Al-Qa'eda fighters had destroyed a *Husseiniya* (a Shiʿa holy gathering place) in Hatla and killed 60 people on a sectarian basis, pointedly bracketing this detail with the news that Saudi Arabia had decided to arm the opposition with surface-to-air missiles.[56]

The only result retrieved for *Al-Arabiya* on Hatla was an article that cited the Syrian Foreign Ministry noting that the US administration's 'support to terrorist groups in Syria… prevent(s) the Security Council from condemning the massacres they have committed, including most recently the Hatla massacre in Deir al-Zour province committed by Jabhat al-Nusra which claimed the lives of more than 60 people, mostly women and children.'[57] The reference was, however, sandwiched amidst an article principally about the UN and the EU demanding an investigation into the Syrian government's alleged use of chemical weapons.

Al-Jazeera Arabic's framing of Hatla was particularly conspicuous because of what it omitted. Both *Al-Jazeera Arabic* and *Al-Jazeera English* posted articles mentioning the incident on 12 June 2013, relying predominantly on information released by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based organisation with a network of volunteers across Syria which has reported rights violations since the start of the conflict. However, the way in which the channels imparted the same information differed starkly. The *Al-Jazeera English* article was entitled 'Reports of "massacre" in Eastern Syria'. The article quoted a Syrian official claiming it had been a massacre of civilians; mentioned the video of the masked militants celebrating killing the 'rejectionists' (Shiʿa), and noted that:

> The reported killings highlight the sectarian nature of Syria's conflict that has killed more than 94,000 people, according to the UN. Both sides in the fighting have been accused of abuses, with the UN saying that war crimes are a "daily reality" in Syria.[58]

Meanwhile, the Arabic version incorporated only a few sentences on Hatla into an article entitled 'Tens killed in Deir Al-Zour' about rebel forces' military advances in the region.[59] The article stated that according to the Observatory, 'most of those killed were militants loyal to the Syrian regime', making no reference to civilians or to the video released.

[56] -'Syrian Army Strikes Militant Positions near Damascus and Al-Qaeda fighters Destroy Hussainiya'. Available at: http://www.almayadeen.net/news/584764/

[57] 'Ban Ki-Moon and Europe demand UN investigation into Syrian Chemical Industry'. Available at: https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2013/06/14/سوريا-تتهم-أمريكا-بالكذب-بشأن-استخدام-الأسلحة-الكيماوية.html

[58] 'Reports of "massacre" in Eastern Syria'. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/201361294448169694.html

[59] 'Tens Killed in Deir Al-Zour and Aleppo'. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2013/6/12/عشرات-القتلى-بدير-الزور-وحلب

Conclusions

Post-2010, *Al-Jazeera Arabic* has borne the brunt of official accusations for promoting the causes of Sunni militant groups, including those who incite anti-Shiʿa sectarian violence. The qualitative analysis conducted for this report, whilst scarcely statistically significant, suggests that *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Mayadeen* both give more airtime than *Al-Arabiya* to a range of non-state groups who publicly advocate violence (*Al-Jazeera* predominantly to Sunni militant groups, *Al-Mayadeen* predominantly to Shiʿa militant groups). Within the parameters of the analysis, however, none of the channels explicitly used sect on air as a justification for violence. Neither was any evidence found of them giving platforms to groups espousing sectarian hate speech on air against Shiʿa or Sunnis respectively, although all channels regularly featured voices who accused their opponents of sectarian violence.

The results studied demonstrated the significance of diverging editorial lines amongst the channels: *Al-Jazeera* was more 'liberal' in its interview policy than the other two channels. But, while this meant that it was more likely to show dissenting views in both countries, it also meant that it was more likely to interview or directly quote individuals who espoused extremist views. *Al-Arabiya* was more controlled in who it gave a voice to, tending to rely more on official sources. But ultimately, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar pursued different politics and back different groups, both *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* have allowed powerful narratives to emerge that collectively cast Sunnis as victims. *Al-Mayadeen* on the other hand, in keeping with Iran and Hezbollah, emphasised the view that Sunnis as well as Shiʿa and Christians were victims of the *Takfiriyyin*.

Following this observation, the principle finding from the case studies is that in a mainstream context, discussion of sectarian violence is politically grounded in competing claims to legitimacy. What is meant by 'inciting sectarian violence,' rarely refers to manifestly abusive hate speech or to condoning human rights atrocities (such as the Speicher massacre perpetrated by Daesh), but to presenting a worldview that justifies the need for violence by a particular sect – even when sect is in fact peripheral to the 'real' cause for violence. Most frequently, the justification is grounded in a narrative of victimhood.

The conflicts in Iraq and Syria have never been purely about sect: much of the violence perpetrated has been within same sect groups, and sympathetic coverage of militant groups is not determined by sect alone. By the same token, there is no shortage of evidence that horrific crimes have been perpetrated against all sects in both countries, often on a manifestly sectarian basis. But by deliberately accentuating, downplaying, or ignoring particular details and views related to these crimes, all of the channels surveyed can be considered guilty of inciting sectarian violence, if only through deliberate negligence. The best way to consolidate this contention would be to measure audience reactions to framing devices applied to the reporting of sectarian violence. Doing so would require extensive surveys and qualitative focus groups, or on a smaller scale, monitoring public comments added to news reports on websites (although these are generally moderated). These tasks fall outside the remit of the current report. Even so, several policy relevant suggestions emerge from the report.

Donors have invested into media content analysis in order to detect hate speech. If, however, as this study suggests, incitement to sectarian violence in the mainstream is contextually evoked, and justifying violence is an ongoing project related to the overall framing of events, it will not be readily detected by automated analysis of isolated tropes or keywords. Data analysis tools, to be useful in monitoring large volumes of media, need to be able to synthesise multiple search criteria and, moreover, detect what pertinent information is omitted.

On the other hand, to counter unbalanced reporting, donors have also explored avenues for promoting 'peace journalism' in post-conflict societies. This has included training journalists on ethical professionalism and encouraging them to avoid certain (contextually determined and in other senses benign) words or phrases that have the effect of promoting violence. Such exercises are valuable in that they can guide journalists to avoid 'sectarianising' issues by noting individuals' sect in conflict situations where it is not necessarily relevant. But this can only be effective where journalists are receptive to such training. As a Lebanese media training professional indicated in an interview, the principle problem with established media outlets is not lack of journalistic aptitude, but political affiliation.

Al-Jazeera is instructive in this respect: the organisation has its own training centre which delivers courses on ethical professionalism. Furthermore, *Al-Jazeera*'s editorial guidelines provide detailed instruction on how to avoid using charged, emotive language or exaggerating the importance of religion when reporting on conflict. Overall, *Al-Jazeera* journalists adhere to these guidelines. And yet, editorial bias creeps through all the same; primarily in the way details are accentuated or suppressed. Some journalists who left *Al-Jazeera* to join *Al-Mayadeen* due to perceived bias have subsequently found the editorial slant of the new channel to be equally skewed.[60] This suggests that legal regulation of tightly defined hate speech would probably not counter incitement in the mainstream media, whilst prohibitions on more loosely defined 'dangerous speech' would likely be used to further suppress free speech.

Political partisanship is scarcely unique to the Middle East. Nonetheless, the level of regional insecurity – coupled with the multi-national viewership of Arab satellite news channels – renders the effect of media outlets' political biases far more potent than elsewhere. Faced with this prognosis, the need for Arab media platforms with international reach whose funding is not bound to political elites is greater than ever. With the explosion of digital platforms across the region, and the diversification of audience viewership, start-up media ventures have proliferated over the past decade. Their main stumbling block thus far has been finding ways to become commercially viable without relying on political patronage or indeed on international development aid which is often closely associated with Western geopolitical agendas. Creative financing initiatives for emerging independent media ventures are vital areas for future research.

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[60] Author interview with former *Al-Mayadeen* journalist, Beirut, September 2018.

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