

Media coverage of the Arab Spring and the new Middle East

Dr Walaa Ramadan

MIDDLE EAST M●NITOR

The Middle East Monitor is a not-for-profit policy research institute that provides research, information and analyses of primarily the Palestine-Israel conflict. It also provides briefings on other Middle East issues. Its outputs are made available for use by journalists, academics and politicians with an interest in the Middle East and North Africa region.

MEMO aims to influence policy and the public agenda from the perspective of social justice, human rights and international law. This is essential to obtain equality, security and social justice across the region, especially in Palestine.

Title: *Media coverage of the Arab Spring and the new Middle East*
First Published: April 2014

Copyright © Middle East Monitor

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission of the copyright owner.

This report is available to download free of charge on the Middle East Monitor Website: www.middleeastmonitor.com



MEMO Publishers
419-421 Crown House
North Circular Road
London, NW10 7PN

t: +44 (0)20 8838 0231
f: +44 (0)20 8838 0705
e: info@memopublishers.com
w: www.memopublishers.com

Media coverage of the Arab Spring and the new Middle East

Dr Walaa Ramadan

Media coverage of the Arab Spring and the new Middle East

Ever since the symbolism of 26 year-old Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010, and the subsequent eruption of a people's revolution in Tunisia, the Middle East has been in unprecedented turmoil. After decades of suffering under oppressive dictatorships, with basic human rights denied, suddenly the barrier of fear was broken and the people rose to topple their dictatorial governments.

Whilst countries were ablaze with revolutions, state-owned media denied any such activity on the ground. State TV channels in countries like Egypt showed empty streets and squares and denied the existence of any sort of uprising. Social media networks played a big role leading up to and during the revolutions, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. Shutting down the internet supply in the country in an attempt to quell and contain the unrest did little to serve the dictators' interests. In fact, in Egypt, the Day of Anger, a key event of the revolution, was held after the internet supply was cut and phone networks provided limited service.

Meanwhile, the uprisings attracted international media attention. In the West, the uprisings were welcomed with some hesitation. After all, the dictators in the region were supporters of Western foreign policy and were paid to stifle their people and allow the West and Israel to carry on with their agendas. Threats to the Western-backed dictators thus caused an uneasy stir amongst politicians and Zionist lobbies.

Major news outlets in the West showed reasonable impartiality in their coverage of the Arab Spring, from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. The BBC launched a review in 2011

assessing its impartiality in reporting the Arab Spring; led by Edward Mortimer, a former UN Director of Communications and expert in Middle East affairs, it published a report in 2012 ([A BBC Trust report](#) on the impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of the events known as the "Arab Spring"). The review findings concluded that the BBC's coverage of the series of events of the Arab Spring was generally impartial, but this changed for the worse after the fall of the regimes, particularly in Egypt.

In the US however, CNN and MSNBC headlines were more interested in the impact of social media as the driving force behind many of the uprisings, claimed New York Times columnist Frank Rich, who [gave examples from CNN reports](#) in which journalists talk about how "the use of social media" was "the most fascinating aspect of this whole revolution". Facebook and Twitter seemed to be a more important focus for coverage and analysis for these channels than the people's suffering under oppressive dictatorial institutions and their struggle for freedom. Journalist Richard Engel set the record straight in an interview on MSNBC: "This didn't have anything to do with Twitter and Facebook; this had to do with people's dignity, people's pride. People are not able to feed their families." Indeed, analysis of the situation showed that demonstrations were taking place in places where internet access was minimal or non-existent, and that many protesters in Tahrir Square in Cairo, for example, did not own mobile phones or have internet access. Speaking to journalists in London, Al-Jazeera's chief political analyst Marwan Bishara explained: "Shortly after the beginning of the Arab revolution, the media began to fixate on the role of social media, ignoring other social and political factors. While important, there is no need to sensationalise the role social media played, treating it as if it were a silver bullet... Facebook doesn't organise, people do. Twitter won't govern, people will."

New technology was undoubtedly a feature; why else would the ousted Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes crack down on internet supply and telephone networks during the revolutions? Social media was not, however, the prime driver of the Arab Spring. As Anne Alexander said, "Due to the prevailing story which ascribes

to technology unrealistic powers, the pre-existing voice of dissent – which had led to hundreds of strikes across Egypt since 2006 – has been ‘eradicated from the narrative’.”

Of course, for the West what was important was whether the “newly-obtained” democracies would be beneficial for the UK and its allies. Indeed, the British parliament was concerned about whether a free and democratic Egypt would prove to be a stronger partner in the Middle East peace process than Egypt under Hosni Mubarak. Indeed, Israeli officials were keen to impress upon the Americans and Europeans that the Camp David Treaty came under threat following the ousting of Mubarak and the rise in popularity of the “Islamists”.

The “general impartiality” in the Western media imposed during the uprisings dropped with the rise in popularity of Islamic parties as the West had feared, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia. Media coverage and the language changed somewhat. It was **not unusual to hear comments** such as, “The Arab Spring has become the Western Winter, brought about by two American presidents who thought they could kill without moral justification or painful consequence. We should come home from these barbaric places and leave them alone. We should trade with them, since they want to buy our iPads and washing machines and blue jeans, but let them run their own governments.”

Coverage became partisan and inaccurate. The Code of Principles adopted by the International Federation of Journalists articulates that universal journalism must embrace certain common ethical and standard principles. These include truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability. The role of the news media is to deliver news to the general public, raw and unedited, with the aim of “trying to reflect or to cover the stories that people created themselves”.

Furthermore, with the advent and development of mobile phones and social media, the latest happenings with raw live footage of protests and speeches, as well as police brutality in dispersing

“The Arab Spring has become the Western Winter, brought about by two American presidents who thought they could kill without moral justification or painful consequence”

demonstrations, were readily accessible to any individual with internet access. The internet had assumed the role of a very effective uncensored news agency, raw from the scene. Such developments proved to be very significant in changing the rules of the game in journalism, and the normal tight media control which the Arab world was accustomed to was suddenly useless. These scenes on the ground were attacked constantly, however, with a non-stop battle to tarnish and violate the facts by people serving certain agendas, powers and ideologies. Accusations of using Photoshop and acting out dramatic scenes were common on state-run TV.

Media is a powerful tool of war, and is used in institutions that seek to adopt democracy selectively, depending on personal benefit and interests. Egypt is a very good example of how the media is not just a tool, but part of the deep state against which the people revolted in 2011. It remained even after the uprising and the removal of the head of that state, but with the deep state still in place, it did not matter much who was outwardly responsible for the nation, in Egypt's case Dr Mohamed Morsi, as Mubarak's institutions remained in place. The media, more than ever, exercised hegemonic control over the public's mind, opinions and life. The universal ethos of journalism became non-existent. The numbers, images, footage and claims were conflicting. Channels that tried to tell the truth were shut down or targeted by hate-campaigns; journalists who tried to cover the events were shot or arrested; and the hiring and firing of journalists was based on political allegiance and connections.

The US-backed deep state in Egypt regurgitated in full-force the 60 year-long war with the Muslim Brotherhood from the moment that the movement nominated a candidate for the presidency. This demonisation was perpetrated mercilessly and shamelessly as Egyptian state media stooped to a new low in broadcasting standards. The sensationalism, degradation and defamation worked miraculously on public opinion, despite not only the contradictions between media claims and the events on the ground, but also despite the absurdity of some of the former.

Accusations of using Photoshop and acting out dramatic scenes were common on state-run TV

The very same Egyptians who had experienced the fraud of the state media during the January 25th Revolution, which exposed its true nature and allegiance, lost all trust and reliability with the people. For the Egyptian people to be struck by mass amnesia after a very short time and pushed back into the arms of the state media is clear evidence of its power. The hate-campaigns spread like fire and language unfit for use by professional presenters on state TV became the language on many tongues. The people became puppets in the hands of the media, surrendering their brains and minds to its mercy.

The media's power went so far as eradicating humanity and morality from many of its followers, bringing scenes and justifications unprecedented in Egyptian history. The use of demonising and derogatory terms to describe anyone who opposes the state agenda, and using generalisations, have become the general understanding and belief. Despite protesters' presence in social media and on the streets, Egypt's state-owned media continues to be the arena of "confirmed" intellectuals, who according to Zvi Bar'el, "successfully re-constitute a hegemonic discourse that dictates the consensus, according to the ruling power's parameters".

For the Egyptian state media, the compass was never directed towards the people, but at the US-backed, Israeli-approved, military-run, dictatorship fulool (Mubarak remnants') regime. The vision, message and dictionary of the fulool alliance were thus one.

When the Arab Spring erupted, the West held its breath, nervous of what the uprising might bring about. Western ideologies and interests were served and the "Islamists" curtailed by the region's authoritarian regimes while the people who had suffered oppression and injustice under these dictatorships had their voices and opinions silenced and quashed; their lives were ruled by fear but the West was able to rest easy knowing that there was no threat to its interests. Indeed, "One of the momentous consequences of the Arab upheaval was the shaking of the authoritarian regional system that for so long stabilised and protected **Western interests**".

Despite protesters' presence in social media and on the streets, Egypt's state-owned media continues to be the arena of "confirmed" intellectuals

The uprisings across the Arab world which were fuelled by a people's quest for universal values of freedom, dignity, justice and democracy, led to a rise in popularity of Islamic-leaning parties and organisations. This was particularly evident in Egypt and Tunisia, with the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Nahda parties respectively gathering tremendous support.

The generalisation that the West uses against "Islamists" is largely due to notions and enforcements advocated by the ultraconservative Salafi groups. Rather than focusing on economic, social and political justice, Salafis focus on inflexible enforceable issues such as gender segregation, dress codes and appearances. Moreover, they are the most anti-West amongst the "Islamists", and although they have emerged very recently, almost obscurely, in the post-revolutionary Middle East, compared with the 84-year old Muslim Brotherhood, their voice is loud and often overshadows the mainstream views of the latter. In a society which delights in controversy, labelling and demeaning the others, and having a scapegoat on which to throw all the blame, all "Islamists" suffered from the Salafi groups' advocacies in restrictions of personal and political lives.

It is incumbent upon the West to exercise greater discernment in its approach to "Islamist groups", which unhelpfully applies to parties across the spectrum, from the moderate groups, like the Brotherhood, to the more extreme like the Salafis and Al-Qaida. There certainly is a division between what the term means in the West and what it means in the Muslim world, where it applies to any Muslim who enters the political arena, with Islam as a frame of reference. However, the West's term "Islamist" has come to refer to anyone of a Muslim background who takes up violence and extremist ideologies as a means to bringing out any political change.

So with the rise in popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Nahda parties in Egypt and Tunisia respectively, in media-speak this meant an Islamisation of the country and dictatorship,

rather than democracy. In Egyptian state TV, the term Ikhwanat el-dawla (“the ‘Brotherhoodisation’ of the state”) was used widely to deter people from voting for the Muslim Brotherhood. An anti-Brotherhood fever soared on Egyptian state TV, convincing the people that should the movement win the elections, then they would enforce a very strict “Islamic” ideology upon the nation forcefully; this campaign focussed on issues such as swimwear, hijab and alcohol. The Western media followed in the same vein.

When Dr Mohamed Morsi won what were credited internationally as free and fair elections, the anti-Brotherhood fear continued and the threat of Ikhwanat el-dawla was enforced repeatedly on state TV viewers. This contradicted the reality of the political scene. Only a third of President Morsi’s cabinet was formed from members of the Muslim Brotherhood; the rest were Liberals, Christians, Salafis, non-Brotherhood Islamists and non-Islamists.

Indeed, Middle East expert **Dr Claire Spencer** from Chatham House in London agrees that, “far too often, we have assumed that the word ‘Islamism’ covers everything on a spectrum from ‘moderate and engaged in democracy’ to ‘radical’.” Intissar Kherigi explains that Islamist parties have existed since the 1920s and “have increasingly embraced democratic pluralism and the concept of equal citizenship”. There are however, many different visions and many different views in the different Islamist parties in the region. Ultimately, the term “Islamist” cannot be generalised.

Similarly, since Morsi’s victory in the June 2012 elections, and particularly running up to and following the bloody military coup in July 2013, any supporter of his legitimacy is referred to as “Muslim Brotherhood”. The hundreds of thousands who took to the street in support of the legitimacy of the democratically-elected president were under fire from the media-led hate campaign very quickly; every pro-democracy, pro-legitimacy person was labelled as a Brotherhood member, which is simply a false assumption to make. This sweeping generalisation is often also expressed by the Western media.

Shortly after the coup, all pro-democracy, anti-coup Egyptians

any supporter of Morsi’s legitimacy is referred to as “Muslim Brotherhood”

were referred to as Islamists or Muslim Brotherhood, although they included Christians, liberals, secularists and socialists. Many had not even voted for Dr Morsi, but respected the democratic process and his legitimacy. The media carried out a very heavy campaign against them painting them in such a way that their extermination would be acceptable and supported. The media played a major role in dehumanising peaceful protesters, which made their elimination justifiable.

The West never went as far as this in their campaign, but still used the same labels, referring to pro-democracy, anti-coup demonstrators as Islamists, members of the Brotherhood or pro-Morsi. They were rarely, if ever, referred to by what they actually are: Egyptians from all walks of life, from all backgrounds, who fought for their right to live an honourable, dignified, democratic life in the January 25th Revolution, and who do not want to return to authoritarianism after tasting freedom and democracy.

Secularists, liberals and remnants of previous regimes coalesced to unite against the "Islamists" in often violent demonstrations (using their new-found freedom) and demonisation of Islamists by exaggerating and falsifying extreme Islamic ideology through endless TV chat shows, social media and graffiti. Their scaremongering undermined the Islamic-led governments and threatened stability, law and order.

Criticism of Dr Morsi's short rule was repeated constantly, but rarely was it mentioned in either the Egyptian or Western media that the army limited the president's powers. It had given itself new constitutional powers removing it from parliamentary oversight, throwing the democratic transition into confusion.

The Western media love to sensationalise, and the best way to do this is through scaremongering. Commentators just need to raise the threat of Al-Qaida or the Muslim Brotherhood regardless of their involvement in order to create a stir. Ironically, Gaddafi, Mubarak and Ben Ali also played this game.

Some ask whether it would have been better to remain in pre-

revolution “stability”, albeit under dictatorial, authoritarian rule, and whether the struggle for change was worth the cost. Indeed, where we are today is totally unprecedented and unimaginable, but history has taught us that change and freedom has a price, and that the desire of the people to live in honour and dignity is greater than their will to submit to an undignified life. The people now have no fear of government power so, surely, victory is but a matter of time.

The West claims to support those who respect human rights and democratic reforms, but the past two years has demonstrated clearly that it is only when it suits their own stability and interests that values and democracy are important. As Chomsky reflects, Western diplomacy supports democracy only so far as it serves its ends. Western governments fail to understand that their interests must be their values, and until this is understood, we are likely to see no change in their position on the new Middle East. “Is Islam compatible with democracy?” they ask, when they should be asking, “Is the Western world compatible with a democratic Middle East?”

MEMO ●
MIDDLE EAST MONITOR
Creating New Perspectives

middleeastmonitor.com