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Muhammed Musa  
*United Arab Emirates University, U.A.E.*

Ahmed S. Mansoori  
*United Arab Emirates University, U.A.E.*

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## **Inclusions and Exclusions in the Narratives of War: Gulf Arabic Press Coverage of Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

By Muhammed Musa<sup>1</sup> and Ahmed Mansoori<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Domestic policies of nation-states as well as trends in media development have further consolidated the role of mainstream media in shaping social and political processes related to international conflicts. Deregulation of the media landscape in Gulf countries has seen the side-by-side existence of both government and private media. In the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, the mass media are significantly shaping citizens' perceptions and understanding within Gulf countries. Similarly, the kind of information disseminated by the media on the conflict plays a role in shaping the behavior of social and political structures within nation-states. While the media alone do not determine government policies, they do shape the circumstances in which policy-making takes place. The media plays a substantial role in setting the agenda for national discourse, which guides policymakers in arriving at certain actions or responses. This study explores the characteristics and trends in the coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict among Arabic newspapers in the Gulf countries. The intention of this study is to gain insight into factors influencing the war narratives by different national newspapers in the Gulf region, and how these could shape national responses to the conflict. Furthermore, this study identifies different features of war narratives, the inclusions and exclusions of women in framing news about the conflict, and factors that shape such frames.

*Keywords:* Arabic press, Russia-Ukraine War, Media, Women journalists

### **Introduction**

Everyday conversation confirming the interconnectedness of the world derives empirical support and sustenance from trade relations between nations, as evidenced by the multicultural flow of goods and people, as well as, at the cultural level, the flow of media content. What is seldom mentioned in such everyday narratives, however, is a crisis, both natural and man-made. This has changed with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, a health crisis that started in China and

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammed Musa is an Associate Professor of Communication at the Department of Media and Creative Industries, United Arab Emirates University. He has previously taught at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Muhammed has authored dozens of book chapters and journal articles and serves on the editorial boards of scholarly journals. He has supervised and examined several MA and Ph.D. theses. His teaching and research interests are in the political economy of the media, journalism studies, and media and social change in developing societies. Email ID: mu.musa@uaeu.ac.ae

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed S. Mansoori is an Assistant Professor and Chair of the Department of Media and Creative Industries at United Arab Emirates University. He earned his Ph.D. in Humanities and Social Sciences with a major in Mass Communication from United Arab Emirates University. His research interests are digital transformation and newsroom convergence, media and social change, journalism, and artificial intelligence. Professionally, he served over 16 years as a reporter, copy-editor, and head for local and international sections at *Al-Ittihad* newspaper in the UAE. He is the 2007 winner of the Arab Press Award and the 2014 Taryam Omran Press Award. Email ID: a.mansoori@uaeu.ac.ae

defied all known borders, becoming a crisis for all countries. Beyond trade and cultural flows, conversations about interconnection now include crises.

Man-made crises such as the Gulf War, the September 11 attack in New York, and the current Russia-Ukraine War occurred in specific geographical locations. However, their impacts are felt worldwide. For instance, while the geographical epicenter of the Russia-Ukraine War is Europe, its impact on the global supply chain is felt worldwide. Countries in the Gulf are either taking stands as mediators in the conflict or coming up with policy statements. This is precisely due to the global nature of the crisis and its humanitarian implications for citizens in the two concerned countries and the world.

Whether the conflict is perceived and understood as one with local humanitarian or global implications depends on how it has been defined and constructed in the news media. As sources of information, particularly on distant events such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the mass media play a role in the shaping and understanding of the conflict among citizens of Gulf countries. Such media construction also plays a role in shaping the behavior of political structures and policies within nation-states (Entman, 1993; Rubin, 2002).

While the media alone do not determine the policy of national governments regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, they do shape the circumstances in which policy-making takes place. Through what they choose to report or not report, the media set the agenda for national discourse, which guides policy-makers within nation-states in arriving at certain actions or responses toward the conflict. In exploring what is reported or not reported, this paper aims to gain insight into gender framing of the conflict among Arabic language newspapers in the Gulf region.

This study employs content analysis to study the trends and patterns of the Arabic Gulf press coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Through this, the study will provide insight into how, even though the Gulf countries of Kuwait, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are all members of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), there are profound differences in their press coverage of the crisis.

## **Theoretical Background**

In what appeared as a renewal in the sociology of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann (1966) explored the “social construction of reality,” albeit from a phenomenological perspective. Of central importance in such a construction is face-to-face interaction, where language, signs, and symbols are key in both the understanding and constitution of social order. However, Berger and Luckmann (1966) overlooked the role of the media in this process. By extension, that shortcoming could also point to the confined nature of the “social order,” whose construction is only face-to-face and therefore possibly bordering on the interpersonal as well as immediate or near surroundings. In reality, for most of us, our horizon and therefore sense of social order extends beyond immediate surroundings, cities, or even nation-states. The world is increasingly becoming a shared space. This sense of globality can be constructed through travel, trade, sports competitions, and so forth, but for the majority of people, a sense of the global space is brought to our perception by or through media images and frames. That our horizon goes beyond our immediate surroundings cannot be contested, particularly in the contemporary world inhabited by mass media and an ever-changing media ecology (Frank, 1944; Tyler, 2022). Several authors have thus explored the centrality of media in our perception of the social. Couldry and Hepp (2016), in particular, studied the social world as a communicative construction where such actions and practices and their forms and patterns contribute to our perception of the social world. Notwithstanding the earlier alternative theoretical discourses of media effects by Klapper (1960), there is a general consensus on the media’s ability to shape cognition and beliefs. This is aptly

encapsulated in Cohen's (1963) observation about the power of the press that may not tell people what or how to think, but can direct people to think about a specific topic.

Given the intensification of the interconnectedness of the modern world, there is also an intensification of the ramification of our social world, which can be understood through direct personal experience, interpersonal interaction, or through the media. While personal experience and interpersonal interactions can inform us of the immediate world around us, it is the media who inform our knowledge of the world and happenings far from us, as observed by Grossberg et al. (1998, p. 293):

[W]hat is true, what is important, what aspects of problems are critical, what Positions various groups have on particular issues, what other people are thinking and doing, and what they think are appropriate ways of behaving—the media have the potential to exert enormous influence.

Thus, our perceptions and viewpoints about events and processes distant from us, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict, are largely formed from media reports about the conflict. Our responses to such conflicts and perceptions of their importance and/or threats are equally dependent on how they are constructed in the media. As Cottle argues:

In exercising their symbolic and communicative power, the media today can variously exert pressure and influence on processes of public understanding and political response or, equally serve to disseminate and distance the nature of the threats that confront us and dampen down pressure for change. In such ways, global crises become variously constituted within the news media as communicated by them (Cottle, 2009, p. 2).

Crises and conflicts have previously taken place or are still taking place in other parts of the world, such as in Southern Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, as well as between Israel and Palestine. Even though the humanitarian disasters that accompanied each of these conflicts could be much higher than what is recorded in other global conflicts, what diminishes them in importance or defines them as local or regional rather than global is largely a matter of perception among people. Given that most people in the world do not reside in Southern Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Palestine, or even Russia, their understanding of these crises as global or local depends on their definition and construction by the media. Many of these conflicts are often dubbed as “forgotten disasters,” not because they measure low on the scale of death and destruction, but because they lack media visibility or are given a skewed media representation.

For a long time, the global news flow was dominated by the media of Western countries, with a largely unidirectional news flow from the West to the rest of the world, defined through a dominant Western perspective. Today, however, a new media ecology has emerged, where conventional media exist alongside online news and social networking platforms, making use of the Internet to unleash a new form of citizen and online journalism.

While conventional media compete with online news platforms, they have clung to their agenda-setting functions, especially in the early days of the break-out of major crises (Bahador, 2007, p. 14; Gilboa, 2005; Livingstone, 1997; Robinson, 2002). What we know or do not know about a given crisis, including the significance we make of it, is therefore largely a product of our interaction with the contemporary media ecology (Holmes, 2000; Nisic & Plavsic, 2014).

Several studies have revealed that crises and conflicts largely gain visibility and definition as global rather than local or regional through their representation by global corporate media. As Cottle (2009, p. 18) submits, "It is in the established news media principally, that global crises are visualized and dramatized, symbolized and narrativized and publicly elaborated- and for many of us it is here too that they are first encountered, possibly 'felt' and 'known.'" Similarly, in his study of the Gulf War media coverage, Shaw (1996) argued that global response and interventions occurred not only on the basis of dominant power interests, but also on the perceived violation of globally acknowledged values and principles in which the media also play a central role.

Given the centrality of the media in providing visibility to conflicts and crises through their definitions and constructions, the question arises surrounding the range of narratives through which these are communicated. Thussu and Freedman (2003) have identified three key roles played by the media in communicating conflicts: critical observers, reproducers of dominant official viewpoints and narratives, and the platforms or battlegrounds on which conflicts and wars are imagined and carried out. This study will explore which of these best speaks to the manner in which the Gulf Arabic newspapers represent the current Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The notion that journalists report conflicts as critical observers carries two assumptions. First, it assumes that in their ascribed role as definers of reality, journalists are able to resist ideological and organizational obstacles and use their professional judgment to report the reality of the conflict. Second, the notion also assumes that journalists are aware of dimensions of power in the execution of war, be they government or military, and they are prepared and equipped to confront such powerful voices. Often cited as the classical example of the "adversarial role of journalists" is the "lost" Vietnam war, essentially as a consequence of journalists reporting the reality of the war with a gory image of American casualties, upon which the public withdrew its support (Hallin, 1986).

The adversarial notion speaks to the watchdog role of journalists and media in a society in which practitioners render power accountable. It is also a notion that journalists use to rationalize their vocation and crusader role in society (Allan, 1999).

In the era of multiple and competing media outlets and an increase in the volume and traffic of news, journalists are ever more alert to scrutinizing official sources in their search for the truth about war and conflict: "[T]he recent expansion in the number of media outlets and volume of news has simply fueled the 'watchdog' role of the media. Increased competition forces reporters to go beyond the handouts and briefings to discover an original story that their rivals may not have discovered" (Thussu & Freedman, 2003, p. 5).

Another journalistic approach to communicating war, the publicist approach, is far from a detached, adversarial role. In this approach, the media and news sources interact in self-serving ways. The media communicate conflicts by being conveyor belts of official voices. This is similar to the indexing hypothesis that views nation-states' foreign policy as deriving from the perspectives advanced by political elites (Bennet, 1990; Mermin, 1997). In this regard, Lawrenson and Barber (1986) have challenged the notion of the Vietnam War as a classic example of the adversarial role played by the media. Instead they argue that both the Vietnam and Falklands Wars served as laboratories for understanding the publicist role of the media, as they merely reinforced official sources. Manchini (1986) noted, for example, that fearing backlash against its military action in Vietnam, as well as its need to mobilize international support, the US temporarily halted its bombing of North Vietnam. Consequently, the media reproduced the official version instead of questioning it, and in this way, were seen to align with patriotism rather than objectivity. This confirms the observation by Herman and Chomsky (1988), that the media disregarded versions of

reality about the war contrary to official positions and jettisoned any ideological alternative to the mainstream narrative. Similarly, on the second day of the ground offensive in Iraq, the media exercised a black-out of the initial phase of the offensive on the directives of President George Bush. Consequently, as Thussu and Freedman opined, “Mainstream media reproduce the frameworks of political and military leaders and in so doing provide propaganda, rather than ‘disinterested’ journalism” (2003, p. 6).

In recent times, one of the starkest pieces of evidence of a media/military alliance that positions the former as a conveyor belt of official narratives was the Pentagon build-up to the invasion of Iraq, and subsequent embedding of journalists in coalition troops at the war front (Strupp, 2003). As well as providing rifle handling lessons to embedded journalists, the latter were also brought to join in routine military physical exercises as a “requirement” to keep fit in the face of rigorous battlefield demands. Joseph adds that:

Often reporting was only through a military censor. Even otherwise through daily briefings, press conferences, interviews, etc. there emerges a tendency to empathize with the military and accept their values. This results in the use of military language that identifies the opposition as the ‘other’ and ‘dehumanizes’ the experiences of the ‘other’...Similarly, at the press conference of President Bush announcing the invasion of Iraq questions were pre-approved and questions were pre-determined. (2014, p. 230)

During the Falklands war between Britain and Argentina, Joseph (2014) notes that the only reporters who covered the battlefield were those chosen and taken by the British Ministry of Defence, ensuring that “the war was reported as the military wanted it to be” (p. 229).

If the first two approaches in media reporting of war are about representations, the third approach is one where the media themselves become the battleground on which war takes place, as well as the means through which the public experiences war. Here, the media/military convergence has been taken to a new level, as evidenced by the notions of war as spectacle, and that of Revolution in Military Affairs (RAM), where war is depicted on television as clean and bloodless. Despite infrastructure destruction and civilian casualties evidentially discrediting such a post-modernist account, “Major innovations in information and communications technology have been eagerly embraced by the military establishment in their PR efforts to present a new and ‘bloodless’ view of war that looks good on domestic television screens” (Thussu & Freedman, 2003, p. 7).

Clearly, the construction of reality about conflicts and war in modern times is done by the media whose reporting of the conflict or war shapes our perception and viewpoints. In such reporting, therefore, whether as critical observers, reproducers of dominant official perspectives, or battlegrounds on which conflicts are staged, the mass media carry out such functions through their assigned reporters. In addition, conflicts and wars are beats or specializations, like economy, crime, health, politics, governance, and sports. The gendered nature of journalism is such that areas known as “hard news” are dominated by male reporters. The process of inclusion and exclusion in news production starts from the beats or specializations so that subjects or topics that fall under these beats stand a higher chance of being covered in the news than those that are not (Hall et al., 1973). Women were seen to have entered journalism specifically to appeal to female audiences in the 19th century (Geertsema-Sligh, 2018). In both the US and UK, newspapers were seen to create women’s pages that would appeal to the constituency of women readers by focusing on soft news or the four F’s—food, fashion, furniture and family—that became the specializations of women

journalists. As such, women journalists were ghettoized as they only wrote on “women's subjects” (Chambers et al., 2004). The situation has implications for the participation of women in news production generally because the entrenched macho culture of newsrooms alienates women, and, by according male reporters the exclusivity or priority of covering hard news, men also stand a better chance of being promoted thereby creating a glass ceiling for women in terms of career progression. The absence of women in leadership positions within journalism can also lead to a lack of role models for women journalists. As well as this, the privileged position occupied by men as reporters of hard news extends to columnist positions on opinion pages (Geertsema-Sligh, 2018). As pointed out earlier, the provision of rifle-handling lessons to battlefield reporters as well as their involvement in routine military physical exercises all add up to make conflict and war reporting a physically dangerous and hyper-masculine environment that systematically excludes women (Tuchman, 1978).

While at a general level, there is an increase in the number of Arab women war reporters because of the rising interest in the conflict in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Sudan, but exploitation of women by news organizations continues as television news often commodifies women's appearance.

## **Method**

This study presents descriptive and quantitative research exploring war narratives in the Arabic Gulf press coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The study utilized the content analysis method on selected newspapers from Gulf countries to gain insights into the nature of their conflict coverage. Content analysis is suitable because of its qualities as a reliable tool in analyzing media texts: “When performing quantitative content analysis, researchers count the manifest, denotative content that is under scrutiny, which is what makes it quantitative in nature ...which hopefully leads to reliability in the study” (Pennington, 2017, p. 236). Other scholars credit content analysis with the ability to analyze any type of data that is concretely observable. (Bell, 2001; Banks, 2007). Our justification for using content analysis therefore is encouraged by two facts: first, that we are dealing with media content, and second that search content is concretely observable.

The study is based on the following research questions:

1. How are traditional Gulf media involved in the coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict?
2. What kind of knowledge and understanding do their narratives and framing provide?
3. To what extent are Gulf media similar or different in terms of conducting balanced news coverage of the conflict or taking sides of either party?
4. To what extent are opinion articles in the Gulf media similar or different in terms of balance and bias?
5. To what extent are women reporters active in the conflict coverage and with what implication for the news frames?

## *Sampling*

Newspapers from the Gulf States of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were analyzed. The newspapers selected were among the top circulating dailies in their countries.

*Asharq Al-Awsat* (The Middle East) is a Saudi Arabian-owned international Arabic newspaper headquartered in London. The newspaper is a pioneer of the “offshore” model in the

Arab press and is often conspicuous for its distinctive green-colored pages. In 2005, the *New York Times* called *Asharq Al-Awsat* “one of the oldest and most influential newspapers in the region” (Fattah, 2005). Although the newspaper is published under the name of a private company, the Saudi Research and Marketing Group (SRMG), it was founded with the approval of the Saudi royal family and government ministers and is known for its support of the Saudi government. The newspaper is owned by Faisal bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a member of the Saudi royal family.

*Al-Ittihad* is a daily Arabic-language newspaper in the United Arab Emirates. It is part of the Abu Dhabi Media Company, a semi-governmental organization. The newspaper is the country’s first regular publication. Like all other newspapers in the country, *Al-Ittihad* is known for its pro-government stance.

*Al-Qabas* is an Arabic Kuwaiti daily published by the Dar Alqabas Press Printing Publishing and Distribution Company in Kuwait City, and owned by a group of vested interests. *Al-Qabas* is known for its liberal stance and outspoken criticism of the Kuwaiti government.

*Al Raya* is a daily Arabic newspaper published in Doha, Qatar. One of the top five Qatari dailies, *Al Raya* is the country’s semi-official newspaper, although it is privately owned. Consequently, it takes a pro-government stance.

The study covers these four newspapers’ narratives on the Russia-Ukraine conflict from the beginning of March 2022 until the end of September 2022, which counts for 214 days as the target period for each paper. Following a systematic sampling procedure, March 1 was selected as the random starting point, followed by a gap of 10 days until the next selection as a fixed sampling interval. The total number of sample days was 24 for each newspaper, and a total of 106 copies were analyzed for the study.

The study developed a coding instrument to analyze different variables such as story location, news topics, story inclinations, visuals, and opinion types, as well as author identity. Story location in the study refers to where the story is positioned (front page or internal pages) as well as the amount of space it occupies (headline, large story, medium size, or small size). Story topic refers to the main theme of the story, such as military combat, politics, human interest, or impact. Story inclination refers to the orientation of the story, such as pro-Russia, pro-Ukraine, or balanced. Story visuals refer to the usage of visual elements in the story, such as photos, infographics, or cartoons. Opinion type refers to opinion articles, such as editorials, Op-Eds, columns, and analyses. Author position refers to whether the author is pro-Russia, pro-Ukraine, critical of the US and EU, or balanced. Author identity refers to whether the author is a local Gulf-based, Arab, or Western author.

## Results and Discussion

A content analysis of four Arabic-language newspapers from KSA, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE was conducted to gain insight into their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Each of these newspapers, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Qabas*, *Al Raya*, and *Al-Ittihad* account for the highest circulation figures of hard copies in their countries and boast of high traffic visits to their websites by online audiences.

In terms of the quantity of news stories on the conflict, data from the sample period, as can be seen in Table 1, indicate that *Asharq Al-Awsat* of KSA accounts for the highest coverage with 155 stories, followed by *Al-Ittihad* of UAE with 98 stories. *Al-Qabas* of Kuwait is third with 63 stories, while *Al Raya* of Qatar is a distant fourth with a meager total of 12 stories.



**Table 1: Story Location of Ukraine-Russia Conflict by Gulf Arabic Media Coverage**

	Front Page Main Headline	Front Page Lower Headline	Internal Story Short	Internal Story Medium	Internal Story Large	Total
<i>Asharq Al-Awsat</i> KSA	4	20	44	55	32	155
<i>Al-Ittihad</i> UAE	0	6	47	26	19	98
<i>Al-Qabas</i> KW	0	3	34	9	17	63
<i>Al Raya</i> QR	0	0	5	3	4	12

There is a political, economic, and cultural dimension to the differences in the amount of coverage. The KSA is regarded as the most influential Muslim country in the world in its capacity as the custodian of the two Muslim Holy mosques and host to the annual continuous Muslim pilgrimages by Muslims worldwide. Muslims from around the world look to the country and its media as sources of information on important global events. This explains why the Saudi paper has correspondents in both Russian and Ukrainian cities who cover the conflict from where it is happening, as well as in many other European cities. This could also explain the huge volume of stories about the conflict from *Asharq Al-Awsat* of the KSA.

The UAE is seen by many as the most economically strategic Gulf country, home to both Emirates and Etihad airlines, which are among the world's leading airlines, host of the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, and several other tourist attractions that bring visitors and investors from all over the world. Russians and Ukrainians reside in the UAE as investors as well as professionals in the public and private sectors, including estate and professional football. As a major world oil exporter, the UAE also has a strategic interest in following developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict due to its implications for world commodity prices. All of these factors render the conflict a high news interest to UAE's *Al-Ittihad* newspaper.

Qatar is also a major world oil and gas exporter, and should have as much interest in the developments surrounding the conflict in Russia-Ukraine; however, one of its leading newspapers, *Al Raya*, accounts for a paltry 12 stories in the sample period. The country is home to the world television network *Al Jazeera*, which has correspondents in all regions and major cities of the world, including Russia and Ukraine. *Al Jazeera* covers all important newsworthy events and activities for its global audiences, while all other Qatar media deliberately focus on domestic news. Generally, therefore, foreign news in most Qatari media receives low coverage.

Kuwait has been reputed to have the most liberal media in the Gulf Region (Mansoori & Musa, 2021). *Al-Qabas* is one such liberal Kuwaiti newspaper in our study. The newspaper has correspondents stationed in Ukrainian cities, from where they cover the conflict. The newspaper, however, has no correspondents in Russia.

### *News Topics and Inclination*

From the topics covered on the Russia-Ukraine conflict by the Gulf Arabic newspapers as well as their inclinations, we shall be able to deduce the kind of representations and narratives about the war and, by extension, the practice of warfare communication engaged in by these papers.

**Table 2: News Topics of Ukraine-Russia Conflict by Gulf Arabic Media Coverage**

	Combat	Politics	Human Interest	Impact	Total
<i>Asharq Al-Awsat</i> KSA	31	67	20	37	155
<i>Al-Ittihad</i> UAE	20	46	10	22	98
<i>Al-Qabas</i> KW	24	15	9	15	63
<i>Al Raya</i> QR	2	5	3	2	12

**Table 3: Story Inclination of Gulf Arabic Media Coverage of Ukraine-Russia Conflict**

	Balanced	Pro-Russia	Pro-Ukraine	Total
<i>Asharq Al-Awsat</i> KSA	109	20	26	155
<i>Al-Ittihad</i> UAE	67	17	14	98
<i>Al-Qabas</i> KW	27	5	31	63
<i>Al-Raya</i> QR	6	5	1	12

For both *Asharq Al-Awsat* of KSA and *Al-Ittihad* of the UAE, politics was the most covered topic regarding the conflict. Similarly, even among its small number of stories, politics was the most important category for Qatar's *Al Raya*. The *Al-Qabas* of Kuwait is the only Gulf newspaper for which military combat took precedence over politics.

Two main features of *Asharq Al-Awsat* have positioned the paper to prioritize the political dimension of the conflict. First, it is a newspaper whose ownership is linked to the most influential Muslim country in the world, which sees its audience to be both Saudi-based as well as worldwide Muslims, particularly the Hajj pilgrims. Second, *Asharq Al-Awsat* has a reputation for being a pan-Arab newspaper. Everyday conversations among Arab and Muslim audiences on social media assess the international response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict and make comparisons in the roots of the two crises, that is, seizure of sovereign land as a breach of international law, but each receiving different international response and attention. Being a newspaper from an influential Muslim country and having correspondents stationed in different cities of Russia and Ukraine are other ingredients that add to making *Asharq Al-Awsat* prioritize the politics of the conflict. Moreover, conversations around the world in the earlier days of the conflict focused largely on the politics of the conflict, such as the international geopolitical struggle characterized by NATO and the European Union (EU)'s attempt at expansion into the former Soviet Union, as well as Russia's attempt to preserve its stature in world affairs and assert control over the region. In addition, there are numerous long-standing grievances within Ukraine that culminated in the Euromaidan protests of 2013, among others, which were all factored into the conversations. In fact, in the early days of the conflict, *Asharq Al-Awsat* dedicated special pages to its conflict coverage.

The prioritization of politics by UAE's *Al-Ittihad* can be explained in two ways. First, like *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Ittihad* also devoted special pages to the conflict in its initial phase, a phase that was dominated by world media and focused on the politics behind the crisis. Second, *Al-*

*Ittihad* has no correspondents in the conflict zone, and therefore relied on international news agencies for whom the politics of the conflict was the focus in the initial phase.

Rugh (2004) has categorized Gulf media as generally loyal to their governments, but even so, he singled out Kuwaiti media as an exception, because of their pluralistic posture in journalism. Being pluralist alone, however, is not the only factor shaping the unique story inclination and subject preference of the liberal newspaper *Al-Qabas*, which focused more on the military combat side of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Online discussions among Kuwaiti audiences show a general sympathy for Ukraine, whose fate they liken to Kuwait's own invasion by Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 1990. In addition to being pluralist in orientation, this general public sympathy with Ukraine could be another explanation for *Al-Qabas*' military combat perspective and its pro-Ukraine story inclination and Op-Ed author position.

According to the data in Table 3, 67 out of 98 stories on the conflict covered by *Al-Ittihad* are balanced, whereas the paper has slightly more pro-Russian stories than pro-Ukraine at 17 and 14, respectively. With no correspondents in Russia or Ukraine, *Al-Ittihad*, therefore, relies on story reports from international news agencies that are largely Western. However, the fact that 68% of *Al-Ittihad*'s news stories on the conflict are balanced indicates that the newspaper conducts thorough gatekeeping to ensure this balance rather than merely reproducing agency stories. In addition, 17 of its news stories are pro-Russian and 14 pro-Ukraine. Of *Al-Ittihad*'s Op-Ed articles, 75% are written by local Emiratis and other Arabs and only 15% by Western writers. This could provide an explanation for its slight pro-Russian inclination.

Table 3 on story inclination sheds some light on the narratives and frames in the coverage of the conflict among Gulf newspapers. *Al-Qabas* of Kuwait is the most pro-Ukrainian of the Gulf Arabic newspapers and publishes much less positive information about Russia. Generally, however, all four Gulf Arabic newspapers have stories that are balanced, rather than stories inclined to either side. Balance here refers to stories focusing on mediation and peace efforts, rather than claims and counterclaims and justification by Russian and Ukrainian leaders and officials.

*Al Raya* in Qatar has the lowest number of news stories on the conflict, at 12. Even at that point, the paper focuses more on the politics of the conflict with six balanced stories, five pro-Russian, and only one pro-Ukraine. The paper's four Op-Ed articles on the conflict were written by Arabs and a Qatari. It is generally the case that the Qatari media does not give much attention to foreign or international news. They largely focus on domestic news and developments as well as leave the coverage of international news to the Qatar-based global television network, *Al Jazeera*.

Table 4 on the participation of women reporters in reporting the conflict shows that only *Asharq Al-Awsat* has a woman reporter writing from Ukrainian cities. In addition, one woman each recorded as a commentator on the conflict for *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Ittihad* of UAE. This confirms the trend of male dominance in areas of hard news. Moreover, these are newspapers and not television, where news organizations in the Gulf region tend to have more women reporters as a way of exploiting women's physical appearances.

**Table 4: Women Journalists/Commentators Covering the Ukraine-Russia Conflict for Gulf Arab Media**

	Reporter	Commentator	Total
<i>Asharq Al-Awsat</i> KSA	1	1	2
<i>Al-Ittihad</i> UAE	0	1	1
<i>Al-Qabas</i> KW	0	0	0
<i>Al Raya</i> QR	0	0	0

### Conclusion

By bringing news stories on the Russia-Ukraine conflict to audiences in their countries and even beyond, Gulf Arabic newspapers are playing a role in the social construction of reality about the conflict. In particular, the Gulf Arabic newspapers play a role in shaping thinking and perception of the crisis among the largely Arabic-speaking Gulf audience. Overall, the Gulf media constructed the conflict as one with global implications, such as the impact on trade and commodity prices and also the possible humanitarian deficit that would result from direct military combat.

We have highlighted earlier that Thussu and Freedman (2003) have proposed three ways through which the media communicate conflict: as critical observers, as reproducers of official narratives, or as platforms on which conflict and war are played out. From the empirical data generated in this study, we argue that the Gulf Arabic press has reported the Russia-Ukraine conflict in a combination of ways, depending on the circumstance of each newspaper and its primary audience. *Al-Qabas* of Kuwait only has correspondents in Ukraine; where a paper chooses to send reporters could also indicate its definition of which location in the world is important and which is not. Its narrative on the conflict is pro-Ukrainian, because the Kuwaiti audience sympathizes with Ukraine, whom they see as suffering a fate similar to that of Kuwait during Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion.

The study's first research question asked how the Gulf press are involved in the coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. According to the results, *Asharq Al-Awsat* of Saudi Arabia is the only newspaper among those studied with correspondents in all the major cities of Russia and Ukraine, and therefore it relies on its own reporters for news. The other two newspapers from Qatar and the UAE have only relied on news stories from international news agencies, and the stories they have published are therefore a reflection of their gatekeeping involvement. *Al-Qabas* of Kuwait has correspondents in Ukraine, and thus observes and reports the conflict from a Ukrainian perspective.

The study's second research question was about the kind of knowledge the newspapers provide. The results found that *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al Raya*, and *Al-Ittihad* all focus on the political dimensions of the conflict that they define and elaborate on in the contexts of NATO/EU expansionism, while *Al-Qabas* focuses more on the military combat dimension of the conflict. It disseminates the perspective of Ukraine as a "victim" of an "aggressive Russia."

Research question four asked about the extent to which opinion articles were similar in terms of their balance or inclination to one party or the other in the conflict. *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Ittihad* carried opinion articles that were more balanced than their other articles, but this was not the case with *Al-Qabas* and *Al Raya*. However, in terms of opinion articles showing inclination

to the major parties in the conflict, *Asharq Al-Awsat* of Saudi Arabia and *Al-Qabas* of Kuwait are pro-Ukraine, while *Al-Ittihad* of the UAE and *Al Raya* of Qatar are pro-Russia.

Research question five asked about the extent to which women reporters are active in covering the conflict and with what implications for the news frame. What emerged in the study shows that only *Asharq Al-Awsat* has a woman reporter covering the conflict from Ukrainian cities. In addition, *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Ittihad* were the only newspapers in the Gulf that recorded a woman journalist commenting in an Op-Ed article on the conflict. The few women reporters across the newspapers are largely in other beats such as culture and lifestyle. This confirms the trend of a hyper-masculine environment for conflict reporting in global journalism and especially in newspapers. While the presence of more women reporters of conflict and war may not necessarily alter the masculine framing of news about the conflict, at least having more women reporters will diversify the sources of news as well as open the space for women's participation in conflict resolution.

From the data generated, there is a varying degree of importance given to the Russia-Ukraine conflict among all the Gulf Arabic press studied. By dedicating special supplementary pages to the coverage of the conflict, as was done by both *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Ittihad*, it can be stated that these newspapers have determined the distant conflict to be newsworthy as well as having general significance and implications for their audiences. The newspapers have deemed the conflict to have relevance and significance resonating beyond Russia, Ukraine, or Europe. This is further underscored by *Asharq Al-Awsat*, who stationed correspondents in various Russian and Ukrainian cities, from where they covered the conflict. With none of its own correspondents in Russia or Ukraine, *Al-Ittihad* relied totally on international news agencies for news stories on the conflict. As a gatekeeper, *Al-Ittihad* has the liberty to select which international news stories have relevance to the local audience, and which do not. Having so many news stories to the extent of dedicating special supplementary pages to its coverage indicates a definition of conflict as one with implications beyond the conflict zone.

Kuwait's *Al-Qabas* also constructed the Russia-Ukraine conflict to have relevance and significance extending beyond the immediate conflict zone. However, by stationing its correspondents in Ukrainian and not Russian cities, the paper is disseminating narratives from only one side to its audience.

*Al Raya* of Qatar, as observed, does not prioritize international news unless it is "breaking news." It has surrendered the coverage of foreign news to the *Al Jazeera* television network. From its few news stories and Op-Ed articles, however, *Al Raya* adopts a Pro-Ukrainian position on the conflict and uses words such as "invasion," "attack," and "violation" to describe Russia's actions.

While we have observed that the media alone do not determine government policies, they can, through what they choose to report or not report on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, set the agenda for national discourse. The study results suggest that the pro-Ukrainian discourse in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia could influence the foreign policy of the two countries if the coverage continues in the same way over the duration of the conflict. Similarly, the pro-Russian inclination in the coverage by *Al-Ittihad* and *Al Raya* may shape national discourse in that direction.

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