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# AL JAZEERA AND AL ARABIYA: UNDERSTANDING MEDIA BIAS

**Dominika Kosárová\***

## **ABSTRACT**

Several studies have been dealing with the question of whether state-sponsored Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are biased. Their findings suggest that the message of both media reflects the interests of their respective state-sponsors. This article aims to validate this assumption, however in contrast to already existing literature it will test the hypothesis on a non-conflict related case study: the coverage of Muslim Summit which was held in December 2019 in Kuala Lumpur. To achieve the objective, we seek to first identify Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's bias, its specific features and the message delivered by means of comparative discourse analysis, namely manipulative strategies and ideological square as defined by Blass and van Dijk, respectively. Afterwards, we examine how the identified bias fits into the strategic interests of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, their respective state-sponsors. The analysis shows that both media, when covering Muslim Summit, used manipulative techniques to deliver the opposite message about the Summit, which is in line with their state-sponsors' often incompatible regional ambitions and foreign policy. This article contributes to already existing literature on Arab media discourse analysis by focusing on a specific non-conflict-related issue not covered by other studies making thus the hypothesis applicable more broadly.

**Key Words:** Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuala Lumpur Muslim Summit, discourse analysis

## **Introduction**

Despite objectivity and neutrality being generally accepted principles of journalism, their implementation is questionable when it comes to state-owned media and countries where freedom of speech has its limits. In such cases, media may serve as a mouthpiece of the government instead of its watchdog. This trend may be observed in the Middle East, where two major news networks, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, are owned by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, respectively, and are

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considered tools of soft power of their respective governments. Numerous studies that focused on Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's coverage of conflict-related issues such as Israeli-Palestinian conflict, intervention in Libya, war in Yemen, or Qatari crisis, suggested that both Arab media serve their respective state to advocate its interests and that the message of both thus needs to be understood in a specific political context. (Gasim, 2018; Seib, 2012; Samuel-Azran, 2013; Miles, 2006; Joobani, 2014; Al Nahed, 2015; Baghernia, Mahmoodinejad, 2018; Elmasry, 2013; Abdulmajid, 2019) This assumption is the starting point of this article. Our aim is to test the hypothesis that *Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's coverage reflects interests of their respective state-sponsor*, yet in contrast to already existing literature we will focus on the coverage of a *non-conflict-related issue*.

After providing some background information about Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, we focus on one specific case study where we first identify specific features of the bias and the message delivered by means of a comparative discourse analysis, and then we observe how it fits into the respective country's interests. Contrary to the existing research, we decided to focus on how the Arab media approach the issue of multilateral diplomacy: the Kuala Lumpur Muslim Summit that took place in December 2019. This event represents a unique case in terms of case study's methodology which serves as testing framework for our hypothesis. Four articles covering the summit have been chosen all together. Their limited number enable us to undertake a rigorous discourse analysis and compare articles between themselves in order to observe different narratives and better identify the bias. At first, we focus on the article published on each media's English-language website on December 18, one day before the summit started. A comparative discourse analysis of these two articles serves to identify manipulative techniques and ideological nuances as outlined by **R. Blass** (2005) and **T. A. van Dijk** (2000), in the coverage of selected topics. Afterwards, to make the picture complete, we observe how the bias evolved by comparing the subsequently published articles. In the final section, we examine if the way how Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya approached the topic can be explained by the strategic interests of Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

This article contributes to already existing literature on Arab media discourse analysis by testing the hypothesis suggested by other researchers on a specific case study. In contrast to most of existing articles, the case study does not deal with the coverage of a conflict-related issue, yet instead it is focused on the issue of multilateral diplomacy. Moreover, discourse analysis is undertaken by means

of qualitative instead of predominantly used quantitative and statistical methods. This enables us to better identify and understand the message delivered as well as interpret the bias in the pertinent political context.

## **1 Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – background information**

Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are the prominent media corporations in the Middle East and major regional competitors in the media industry. Al Jazeera news channel in the Arabic language was established in 1996 under the initiative of the then emir of Qatar Sheikh **Hamad bin Khalifa Al Tahni**. It was part of reforms launched after he seized power in 1995 to enhance regional and global influence of Qatar. Moreover, Al Jazeera was expected to counter narrative of Saudi and Egyptian journalists who had been questioning legitimacy of the new emir. (Powers, 2012) Since beginning Al Jazeera has been reporting critically on political authorities throughout the Middle East, causing thus trouble for their governments as well as for Qatar, which has been repeatedly facing diplomatic pressure from other Middle Eastern states.

Al Jazeera's geopolitical significance and global recognition increased after 9/11 for its reporting in Afghanistan, yet, at the same time, it has become increasingly criticized by the West for providing space to extremists including **bin Laden**. (Samuel-Azran, 2013) Nevertheless, the war in Afghanistan showed increasing demand of timely and accurate news about underreported regions such as Middle East, which prompted Al Jazeera to launch its English-language version. Al Jazeera's English language website started to operate in 2003 only few days after the US-led invasion of Iraq. Moreover, in 2006 English-language television called Al Jazeera English was established. The objective was to reach English-speaking people with news about so-called "Global South", as well as improve Al Jazeera's reputation in the West and enhance global prestige and significance of the small Gulf state. (Powers, 2012) Ultimately, Al Jazeera enabled Qatar to shape international discourse.

Although Al Jazeera was claimed to be independent from state's interference, number of studies show, this has not been the case because the network is financially dependent on the royal family of Qatar.<sup>1</sup> (Abdulmajid,

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<sup>1</sup> The emir invested 137 million USD only to create the channel in the 1990s, whereas he provides another approximately 100 million USD per year to cover its operational costs. Moreover, he invested more than a billion USD to launch Al Jazeera English. (Samuel-Azran, 2013)

2019; Samuel-Azran, 2013; Elmasry et al., 2013) In this context, **Samuel-Azran** considers Al Jazeera as a hybrid state-sponsored/private network that serves as a diplomatic tool for Qatar. Hybrid model implied that *“a state sponsored station operates independently in routine affairs, which gives it the credibility of a privately-owned station and reverts to state-sponsored-style broadcasting only during a crisis involving the state”*. (Samuel-Azran, 2013, p. 1294) Critics accuse Al Jazeera of bias and point to its selective criticism of Qatar’s foreign policy while remaining silent when it comes to domestic development. (Miles, 2006; Cherribi, 2017; Hasan, 2011; Seib, 2012). Al Jazeera is thus often perceived as a political instrument of Qatar aimed at enhancing its international influence and leveraging against regional rivals, especially Saudi Arabia. Al Jazeera’s criticism of Saudi domestic policy and its alleged support for political Islam in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular has been a thorn in Saudi-Qatar relations, and it has ultimately led to a diplomatic crisis.

Al Arabiya news channel was launched by Saudi Arabia in 2003 to challenge Al Jazeera’s monopoly as Middle East-based international news network. It was established in Dubai, primarily in response to Al Jazeera’s criticism of Saudi Arabia and its royal family. (Kraidy, 2006) In less than a year, an official website of Al Arabiya news channel started to operate, and in 2007, its English-language web service was established to reach broader audience. Its officially proclaimed mission is to *“deepen understanding of Arab societies, cultures and economies”*. (Joobani, 2014, p. 346) However, Al Arabiya is owned by the Middle East Broadcaster Center controlled by Saudi Arabia, hence, just as in the case of Al Jazeera, Saudi-sponsored Al Arabiya is largely under the government’s control. As concluded by extensive research papers, its discourse is in line with Riyadh’s interests and Saudi Arabia’s foreign and domestic policy. (Baghernia, Mahmoodinejad, 2018; Elmasry et al., 2013) Al Arabiya thus serves as a *“Saudi-speak of the Arab world”* that informs about events through Saudi lenses. (Joobani, 2014, p. 345)

## 2 Comparative discourse analysis

### 2.1 Literature review

There are numerous studies examining Al Jazeera’s and Al Arabiya’s

narratives in order to evaluate the impact of their state-sponsor on reporting. **Mohamad H. Elmasry** together with other researchers used media framing theory for a comparative content analysis of the two networks' coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict in 2008/2009. The research concluded that Al Jazeera's narrative tended to be more positive towards Hamas and it was more critical against Israel, Egypt, USA and the United Nations, whereas Al Arabiya's coverage had exactly the opposite direction. According to the authors, these findings reflect the tendencies in Qatari and Saudi foreign policy. (Elmasry et al., 2013) Secondly, **Adib Abdulmajid** analysed politicization and ideologization of both Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's narratives during the Qatar diplomatic crisis in 2017. By means of critical discourse analysis, in particular discursive ideologization and manipulation, he examined how the crisis dragged the two media networks into a direct confrontation. By studying news coverage of regional affairs in 2017 and 2018, **Abdulmajid's** research reveals that both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are politicized and serve as guardians of political goals and interests of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, respectively. (Abdulmajid, 2019) Thirdly, **Li Zeng** and **Khalaf Tahat** compared the coverage of terrorism by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya and pointed out that Al Arabiya is more inclined to adopt Western and especially US style of reporting by covering the regions that are more of Western interest. (Zeng, Tahat, 2012) In general, Al Jazeera is often perceived as more anti-American and anti-Israeli, whereas Al Arabiya has been accused of advocating Western interests. (Elmasry et al., 2013)

In the overall, there are more studies examining Al Jazeera's news coverage and bias than Al Arabiya's. Al Jazeera's reporting on Yemen has been subject to **Gamal Gasim's** research on how the coverage of Yemeni war was influenced by the Qatari crisis. His study shows that number of negative news with respect to Saudi-led coalition and its role in the Yemeni war increased significantly after Qatar was expelled from the coalition in 2017. Al Jazeera was thus found to advocate political standpoint of Qatar whose relations with Saudi Arabia became especially tense after Saudis declared blockade of its neighbour. (Gasim, 2018) Finally, **Sumaya Al Nahed** compared the coverage of Libyan uprising and subsequent NATO intervention by Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Jazeera English.<sup>2</sup> Her results pointed out that Qatar's foreign policy has greater influence on Arabic version of the news. (Al Nahed, 2015)

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<sup>2</sup> The role of Al Jazeera on the background of Libyan revolution is pointed out also by Hana Votradvocová (2017).

All the above-mentioned studies show that both Arab media giants are more or less biased, and their discourse is politicized to serve their sponsor state especially when dealing with a conflict situation where states have certain interests at stake. This article will test their findings on a unique case of a non-conflict-related issue.

## 2.2 Methodology

To test the hypothesis that Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's coverage reflect interests of their respective state-sponsor we need to first identify the bias. **Robert Lichter** (2014) defines bias as *"distortions of reality, favoritism or one-sidedness in presenting controversies, and closed-minded or partisan attitudes"*.<sup>3</sup> **Steven Allen** then distinguishes eight types of media bias: bias by commission (unfounded assumptions and uncorrected errors), bias by omission, bias by story selection, bias by placement of news stories, bias by the selection of "experts", spin (emphasizing certain aspects), bias by the labeling of activists, organizations, and ideas, bias by policy recommendation. (Allen, 2015) However, there is no single generally accepted way of measuring bias. In this article, the media bias, as understood by **Lichter** and **Allen**, will be identified and analysed by means of discourse analysis.

When analyzing media bias, we stem from the assumption that *"specific ways messages are packaged and delivered can influence how communication recipients comprehend and evaluate messages."* (Elmasry et al., 2013, p. 753) Parts of the story may thus be emphasized, while others may be deliberately excluded in order to influence recipient's opinion in a desired way. Hence, the choice of language and wording are powerful tools to deliver a certain message. In order to identify this message, the use of language needs to be studied by means of critical discourse analysis. In this article, we will combine elements of manipulative strategies as defined by **Regina Blass** (2005) and so-called ideological square of **Teun A. van Dijk** (2000). Both tools were applied by **Abdulmajid** (2019) to study media and ideology in the Middle East, and we

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<sup>3</sup> Theories of media bias emphasize its opposition to objectivity which emerged as a standard of professional journalism first in the US media industry, from where it has spread as a core value of journalism to other countries. Consequently, professional media are expected to remain unbiased, hence objective, especially when dealing with political issues. Yet, in reality, the application of this principle remains disputable and according to Lichter, it may seem even as an "unattainable ideal". Moreover, as Lichter points out, the interpretation of objectivity may depend also on national and cultural context. (Lichter, 2014)

consider them as appropriate for the purposes of this article as well. We assume that these two qualitative methods when combined will enable us to identify important nuances in the selected news articles and the messages delivered.

According to **Blass** (2005, p. 171), manipulation can be regarded as intentional misleading, as a “*way of influencing people and making them believe and do what one wants them to do*”. Manipulative strategies include omission (deliberate withholding of relevant information), exaggeration (over-statement providing more information than required), lies, ambiguities or half-truths (deception by providing less information). Facts are thus provided intentionally distorted with respect to the message that the article seeks to deliver. Manipulative strategy also includes means of propaganda such as repetition and emotional appeal. (Blass, 2005)

The second tool, so called “*ideological square*”, is used to analyse the bias when referring to *us versus them*. It implies that we tend to say positive things about ourselves while not admitting anything negative, whereas it applies in the opposite way when referring to the others. This principle was conceptualized by **van Dijk** as ideological square which consists of *emphasizing* (1) positive things about us and (2) negative things about them, while *de-emphasizing* (3) negative things about us and (4) positive things about them. (van Dijk, 2000, p. 44) In this article, *us* means state-sponsor (Qatar in case of Al Jazeera and Saudi Arabia in case of Al Arabiya) eventually its allies, while *them* are rivals or enemies. Hence, a biased discourse is the one where the state-sponsor is non-critically glorified, or it does not accept any responsibility for eventual failures for which the others are accused instead.

Stemming from these two approaches, in this article, discourse analysis will be focused on: *language used when referring to the actors involved* (self-perception and perception of others), use of *omission, exaggeration, lies, ambiguities, half-truths, repetition and emotional language*, as well as *style* (headlines, subtitle, use of bold, italics and colour) as it may also reveal what the author wants to emphasize. Monitoring of these manipulative techniques will allow us to identify and compare bias in selected articles, and thus better understand their message as well as attitude of respective state-sponsors.

Selection of the articles was preceded by a preliminary research. We decided to examine one case study not directly dealing with a conflict and focus on how the websites of Al Jazeera English and Al Arabiya English cover this specific event. Therefore, the number of researched articles is quite limited. However, we do not consider it as an obstacle or shortcoming, because it allows us to make a



more precise and rigorous research of manipulative techniques and even compare the articles between themselves. After having considered several events, we chose to focus on the Muslim Summit which was held from 19 December 2019 in Kuala Lumpur. This event represents a unique case in terms of case study's methodology. We studied the articles that relate to the topic and were published on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya from December 18, the day before the summit was held. This was the first time when both pages provided a more complex information about the summit. The fact that they reported about it on the same day, allows us to compare articles between themselves and interpret the message and the bias without any other factors that could have intervened meanwhile. These two articles from December 18 are thus crucial for the analysis and most of the space will be devoted to them.

However, to make the picture more complex, and validate and expand our findings, we decided to examine two other articles published subsequently. Al Jazeera reported about the summit on its first day, December 19, while Al Arabiya informed about it only after it was concluded, on December 23, in the "opinion" section. We decided to include the article published under "opinions" and not "news" because of three reasons. First of all, it is supposed that even "opinions" published in state-owned Arab media do reflect state's policy and could be thus considered. Moreover, the article in question is written by Al Arabiya's editor-in-chief, which further reinforces our previous assumption. Last but not least, there were no other articles related to the summit published in the news column, hence this article was the only source of information about the summit on Al Arabiya website after the summit began.

Articles examined on Al Jazeera English (AJE):

- *Kuala Lumpur Summit: Five major issues facing Muslim world*, news, 18.12.2019
- *Mahathir Mohamad: Muslim world 'in a state of crisis'*, news, 19.12.2019, by Ted Regencia

Articles examined on Al Arabiya English (AAE):

- *Key Islamic powers shun Malaysian summit*, news, 18.12.2019,
- *Failure of Malaysia's Muslim summit is only the tip of the iceberg*, opinion, 23.12.2019, by Mohammad Alyahya

## 2.3 Research and findings

The first and the most crucial part of the comparative discourse analysis is focused on the two articles published the day before the summit. Afterwards, we will observe how the articles published during or after the summit fit into the identified bias, eventually how the bias evolved.

### 2.3.1 Use of manipulative techniques in the pre-summit articles

In order to identify manipulative techniques in the two articles, we will first focus on their headings. Then, we will identify and compare the bias used in the main body of the articles by focusing on the coverage of three specific issues: participation at the summit, agenda of the summit, and the way summit itself is portrayed.

#### **Headings**

There is a striking difference between Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's approach to the topic already when looking at the title and subtitle of the articles. The title on Al Jazeera states: *"Kuala Lumpur Summit: Five major issues facing Muslim world"*. It evokes that the most important issues of the Muslim world will be addressed at the summit, which implicitly emphasizes the importance of the summit as such. Moreover, it is subtitled: *"Leaders from some of the world's most populous Muslim-majority nations set to address issues like Islamophobia, poverty"*. This word choice underlines the importance of participating countries, thus the prestige of the summit. Both title and subtitle embrace elements of exaggeration, as it includes words like "major", "leaders", "most populous", "majority". It can be thus claimed that Al Jazeera tries to send a positive message in terms of summit's importance already by the title and subtitle.

On the other hand, the very same day, Al Arabiya published a news article about the summit entitled *"Key Islamic powers shun Malaysian summit"*. It also embraces element of exaggeration by using the words "key" and "powers", however the message is exactly the opposite when compared to Al Jazeera. The verb "shun" has rather a negative connotation and evokes that key players *deliberately avoided* to participate. The wording thus implicitly de-emphasizes the importance and prestige of the summit by the fact that states regarded as major Islamic players declined participation.

Moreover, the headlines show how differently Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya approach the participation at the summit with respect to the message they want to deliver. While Al Jazeera states that "leaders from some of the world's most

populous Muslim-majority nations” are set to participate, Al Arabiya claims that key Islamic powers will not. This does not necessarily mean that one of them is lying. None of them states how many nations will actually participate, instead, they intentionally use ambiguous language and half-truths to send their message: emphasize the prestige or failure of the summit. Comparison between the two headlines thus enabled us already to identify a clear bias. While Al Jazeera tries to portray the summit in a positive way, Al Arabiya adopted exactly the opposite approach.

### **Participation**

Both articles devote a considerable space to address the issue of participating states. At the same time, this is the issue where the most discrepancies between two narratives occurred. Al Jazeera states that *“various world leaders and representatives of the Muslim world - from the North African state of Algeria to Uzbekistan in Central Asia and Brunei in the Asia Pacific region - gather in Kuala Lumpur”* to show that summit has global dimensions. In line with this message it also claims that *“according to the organisers, at least 250 foreign representatives from 52 countries and 150 Malaysian delegates will also join the KL Summit. They include government officials, scholars and leaders from various non-government sectors.”* However, Al Arabiya claims on the very same day that *“invitations had been sent to all 56 OIC [Organization of Islamic Cooperation] member states, but officials said only about 20 were sending delegations, and fewer would be led by heads of state.”* Comparison between the last two statements shows clear contradiction when it comes to the number of attendees. However, language has been used in such a way that none of the statements needs to be necessarily wrong. Al Jazeera is focused on the overall number of represented countries, which it claims is 52, regardless of who represents the country (government officials, scholars, NGOs representatives). It is a high number, close to the overall number of the OIC members. On the other hand, we do not know what Al Arabiya means by *“countries that were sending delegations”*, whether it includes also countries that may not have sent government representatives, but the number is significantly lower. At the same time, Al Arabiya claims that *“even as delegations were arriving in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian officials were unable to provide a final list of who would be attending.”* This statement may serve to evoke organizational failure, yet at the same time it may serve as an excuse if the overall number of attendees was ultimately higher. The question is, if Al Jazeera claims to know the number, how come, that Al

Arabiya states that even organizers do not have that knowledge, and vice versa.

In addition, Al Arabiya states that the meeting *“failed to attract key Middle Eastern powers”* and that it *“has been shunned by more than half the invited nations including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and Pakistan.”* The first sentence re-emphasizes the aspect of failure while the second one points to the absence of the states regarded as key powers in the Middle East. These countries are Saudi allies, and their explicit enumeration may serve to legitimize Saudi Arabia’s absence given that it is not the only regional player not to participate.

When it comes to the absences, Al Jazeera adds that there are *“notable absences, including the leaders of Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.”* Yet, it does not say anything about the fact, that Indonesia and Pakistan belong to countries with the largest Muslim population with Indonesia on the very top of the list. (Diamant, 2019) Their absence at the summit thus shows that the language in the subtitle of the article stating that *“leaders from some of the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nations”* are set to participate, was strategically chosen. It is not a lie, due to the word “some”, but it omitted the fact, that two countries with the largest Muslim population will not be present. Instead, Al Jazeera focused on participation of other countries with large Muslim population, including Iran and Turkey. Their presidents are referred to as *“fellow heads of state”*, which has a clear positive connotation. When it comes to Iran, the article also tries to de-emphasize negative aspects about its current international position, when it states that *“Iran faces US economic sanctions, which Malaysia’s Mahathir described on Saturday as a violation of international law”*.

Saudi Arabia is also mentioned, yet in this case, the connotation is rather negative. The statement that *“Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan cancelled his trip after a visit to Saudi Arabia over the weekend”*, implicitly evokes Saudi Arabia’s responsibility for Pakistani absence. Moreover, although not mentioning Saudi Arabia directly, it mocks of allegations that Summit seeks to replace OIC, when it claims that: *“He [the summit secretary-general] laughed off suggestions that the event is meant to create a new bloc that could compete with the OIC.”* This statement could make allusion to Saudi Arabia’s official excuse for not taking part at the summit by affirming that *“the summit was the wrong forum for matters of importance to the world’s 1.75 billion Muslims”*, and instead *“such issues should be discussed through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation”*. (AAE, 2019)

## **Agenda**

Certain discrepancies in the language used may be observed also when it comes to the agenda of the summit. On Al Jazeera, the summit is stated to address *“the plight of the Muslims”, “correct many misconceptions about Islam as a religion” and “offer concrete solutions to improve trade between and within Muslim countries”*. It is mentioned already in the headline and repeated further in the text that Muslims are facing five major issues, which evokes that these issues could be addressed at the summit. Moreover, about three quarters of the article are devoted to these five issues, namely: the Rohingya refugee crisis, Uighur mass detentions in China, war in Yemen, gender inequality and economic disparity. The article does not explicitly state that they will be on the agenda of the summit, but the way it is articulated, and the amount of space devoted to it, makes the recipient expect that they will be addressed.

On the other hand, Al Arabiya explicitly states that *“no agenda has been released”* which re-emphasizes the limitations of the summit. At the same time, it suggests that *“the meeting could address divisive issues including the Kashmir region, which is disputed between India and Pakistan, the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, the plight of Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslim minority and mounting outrage over China’s camps for Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.”* These issues are presented only as suggestions and they are not claimed to be on the agenda. Compared to Al Jazeera, economic disparity and gender equality are not mentioned on Al Arabiya, whereas Al Jazeera, on the contrary, omitted Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir and conflict in Syria. Emphasis of some issues while withholding others may reflect priorities and interests of state-sponsors. When it comes to the space devoted to the agenda, Al Arabiya mentioned Uighur Muslims in two more sentences, but otherwise the issues that could be addressed at the summit are enumerated without further elaboration. This may reflect the degree of interest and amount of importance allocated to the summit. While Al Jazeera elaborated on particular issues of potential agenda to emphasize the problems that the Muslim world is facing and thus underline the importance of the summit, Al Arabiya instead focused on summit’s failures while emphasizing the importance of OIC, already existing format to deal with problems in the Muslim world.

## **Summit**

There are few statements about the summit as such that should be of our particular attention. Al Arabiya claims: *“One Saudi commentator said the summit was intended to further the cause of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist regional*

group that is classed as a terrorist network by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain.” This allegation creates a link between the Summit and the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement that has been designated by Saudi Arabia and its allies as a terrorist group. It serves thus to delegitimize the summit as such by emphasizing its assumed negatives. However, this delegitimization is based on the assumption of an anonymous Saudi commentator without providing any further evidence. It may be thus considered as intentional misleading of recipients. Moreover, the summit is designated as *“the wrong forum”* while the role of the OIC to deal with Muslim issues is emphasized instead.

In this context, Al Jazeera repeats several times that the summit does not seek to replace or rival the OIC and it criticizes those who think so, implicitly thus referring also to Saudi Arabia. When referring to the summit and its mission, it states that *“the summit should be genuine”* and that it *“seeks to produce “results” on addressing the plight of Muslim around the world”*. These statements underline assets of the summit, its high ambitions, global dimensions and commitment to offer solutions. The message is filled with belief that this summit will succeed to bring some concrete results. Hence, there is a striking difference between Al Jazeera’s and Al Arabiya’s approach to the summit as such. While one calls it genuine, the other one considers it the wrong forum and a tool of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the overall, Al Jazeera’s coverage of the summit has a positive connotation while Al Arabiya tries to portray summit in the negative light. Both emphasize and exaggerate positives or negatives as suited for their purposes. They deliberately use ambiguous language, half-truths and withheld some relevant information in order to emphasize their message. Al Jazeera wants to present the summit as a potentially efficient platform that could solve some of the major issues facing the Muslim world. At the same time, it tries to de-emphasize negatives about Iran, while pointing out negatives about Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Al Arabiya informs about the summit by focusing on the aspect of failure, which is the central motive of the studied article. By emphasizing negatives, it tries to de-legitimize the summit as such. A rigorous analysis of the two articles thus enabled us to identify a clear bias in both of them. To validate and expend our findings, two more articles will be subject of comparative discourse analysis.

### **2.3.2 Discourse analysis in the subsequent articles**

Al Jazeera published another article on the first day of the summit. Entitled *“Mahathir Mohamad: Muslim world 'in a state of crisis’”*, it summarizes some of

the main points presented by speakers. Yet still, it does not refrain from repeatedly reminding the absence of Saudi Arabia throughout the text. Already the subtitle written in italics and grey colour states: *“Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were notably absent from meeting of Islamic nations at the Kuala Lumpur Summit”*. In addition, when talking about Malaysian Prime Minister’s speech, it is stated: *“But even as he sought a unified voice among Muslim-majority states to address those issues, several countries - including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan - were absent from the meeting”*. Focus on Saudi Arabia’s absence may be perceived as exaggerated and repetitive, thus as a tool to deliver a specific message.

The article quotes the speakers, including Iranian and Turkish Presidents, Qatari Emir, Malaysian Prime Minister, as well as Jordanian and Malaysian academics. Yet still, several of the quotes refer to Saudi Arabia and always in a negative way, while OIC is portrayed rather as inefficient organization. Malaysian professor for instance blamed Saudi Arabia and its *“virulent ideology”* from sectarianism while Jordanian academic hoped that *“the summit will deliver alternative solutions to issues not addressed by the OIC”* and called for *“the emergence of a ‘new coalition’ of like-minded countries to address issues in the Muslim world.”* Anti-Saudi narrative can be thus easily identified. With respect to “us versus them” distinction, Saudi Arabia clearly represents “them”. On the other hand, participants at the summit, including often quoted heads of states of Turkey, Iran and Qatar, might be understood as “us”.

When it comes to Al Arabiya, the next information about the summit came after it was concluded. The title *“Failure of Malaysia’s Muslim summit is only the tip of the iceberg”* reveals that the message will be in line with the previous article published on December 18. The author repeats several times that only three heads of states out of 56 invited participated at the summit, and he calls it a *“micro-summit”* and a *“political failure”*. Failure is emphasized also in the very first sentence stating: *“Malaysia’s attempt to unite Muslim powers in a summit held last week in Kuala Lumpur failed to attract heads of state from 53 Muslim countries”*. The term *“failed to attract”* is used as a hyper-link to the previous article from December 18, and is highlighted in bold and purple colour to further emphasize the message.

There is also a clear distinction between “us” and “them” throughout the article. When the author refers to the three heads of states that attended the summit – Iran, Turkey and Qatar – he calls them *“embattled”* and blames them of trying to *“reinvent an outdated vision for Islam that is fundamentally hostile to the*

*West and, indeed, hostile to the dreams and aspirations of their own people.”* The author states that the fault lines are between a “backwards-looking ‘political Islam’ represented by Iran and its Muslim Brotherhood friends Qatar and Turkey, and Arab powers who realize the danger and obsolescence of these archaic ideologies in the face of an increasingly educated and globalized youth bulge in the Middle East.” He implicitly classifies Saudi Arabia into the second category of states that understand the incompatibility of political Islam, described as archaic and obsolete, with the needs of increasingly educated and globalized youth. He even makes a link between the ideology of the states from the first category, which he claims is hostile to the West, and terrorism, when implicitly evoking that since September 11 Saudi Arabia has “embraced the reality of a budding post-ideological Middle East” in contrast to those other states.

The author also tries to de-legitimize the calls for an alternative body to the OIC by stating that: “*The embattled leaders who rallied to the call of the Malaysian leader last week are concerned that the influence of political Islam is waning in the OIC, which continues to be the pre-eminent international body for Islamic power, and therefore a new body would be required to promote their obsolete revolutionary thinking.*” Not only he used words with strong negative connotation such as “embattled” and “obsolete revolutionary thinking”, but he tries to explain the effort to create a new platform by desire of those states to enhance political Islam. At the same time, OIC is described as “*the pre-eminent international body for Islamic power*” to emphasize its unique role.

These two articles adopted the same direction of discourse as the previous ones. They try to strengthen and even further elaborate the message sent previously. Moreover, in this case, “us versus them” narrative is much more visible. While the first two articles focused on the summit as such and participation more in general, the subsequent articles focused on specific actors that did or did not participate. At first, Al Arabiya tried to delegitimize the summit as such, while the next article was focused on delegitimization of particular states, namely Iran, Turkey and Qatar. At the same time, the author tried to distinguish Saudi Arabia from *them* by pointing out to ideological differences. On the other hand, Al Jazeera’s original message was focused on the prestige of the upcoming summit and although anti-Saudi narrative was already present, it has become one of the central motives in the subsequent article. The analysis of four articles all together enabled us to identify manipulative techniques and thus the main direction of bias used by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in the coverage of the Muslim Summit. However, every bias has its strategic meaning. In case of Al Jazeera and Al



Arabiya, this strategic meaning is expected to be provided by state-sponsors. The next chapter is thus focused on settling the bias in the context of both states' strategic interests and objectives.

### 3 Interpretation of findings in the context of countries' strategic interests

In order to interpret the bias with regard to countries' strategic interests, we need to now at first what those interests are. Qatar's interests need to be understood in the context of country's geopolitics. Qatar is a small emirate in terms of size (11,586 square kilometres) and population (1,7 inhabitants, while only 250 000 are Qatari citizens). However, its size is compensated with abundant natural resources especially natural gas and oil reserves which makes it the world's richest nation in terms of per capita GDP. (Suneson, 2019) However, Qatar's opportunities are influenced by the fact, that it is situated at the border between the Sunni and Shia world. (Cherribi, 2017) It shares a land border with only one state, Saudi Arabia, while Iran is located across the Persian Gulf. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran claims leadership in the Muslim world, and both are considered as de facto leaders of Sunnis and Shias, respectively. Hence, Qatar is embedded between the two regional powers that are currently engaged in a kind of cold war with each other. In this context, Qatar has been trying to form its own independent foreign policy, and in particular, it seeks to emancipate itself from Saudi Arabia's influence and shadow.

Qatar's contemporary foreign policy is linked especially to its previous emir, **Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani**, who seized power in 1995 and ruled the country until 2013. He wanted not only to emancipate country, but also to increase its regional and global influence. Given country's wealth, he wanted to make Qatar *"the next Saudi Arabia"*. (Seib, 2012) According to **Cherribi** (2017) Qatar is even willing to change the regional status quo. In order to divert from Saudi Arabia and ensure itself a better position in the post-Arab spring world, it chose to support the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the Arab world. (Roberts, 2014) These are the reasons that contributed to the Qatari crisis, when Saudi Arabia with its regional allies severed their diplomatic relations with Qatar and declared blockade of the country. As a result, Qatar strengthened its ties with Iran and Turkey.

Al Jazeera's articles covering the Muslim summit can be understood on the background of this political context. As Qatar tries to strengthen its international

position and increase its global influence, eventually become a diplomatic hub, it perceives such a summit as a unique opportunity to achieve its goals. It is thus understandable, why Doha-based and sponsored Al Jazeera informed about the summit in a positive way. Moreover, given increased tensions among GCC members as a result of the Qatari crisis, Qatar may welcome an alternative format of cooperation among Muslim states. Beside Qatar, only Iran and Turkey were represented by the head of state, which enabled the small Gulf country to further strengthen its relations with these two non-Arab Muslim states to eventually counterbalance Saudi Arabia and its allies. This explains why Al Jazeera was emphasizing Iran's and Turkey's presence as well as de-emphasizing negatives about Iran, while at the same time, emphasizing negative aspects about Saudi Arabia. The way how particular actors were approached clearly indicated contemporary foreign policy interests of Qatar. The two studied articles thus inform not only about the summit, but ultimately, they report on Qatar's foreign policy and its strategic interests.

When it comes to Saudi Arabia, it has two major strategic interests that are closely related to its natural wealth and location. First, Saudi Arabia wants to maintain *regional status quo*. It has thus repeatedly denounced uprisings across the Arab world while groups that call for regime change or reforms, including the Muslim Brotherhood, are considered by Riyadh as a potential threat to its own regime and domestic stability. Secondly, Saudi Arabia claims itself to be "*the eminent leader of the wider Muslim world*". (Al Faisal, 2013, p. 38) This claim stems from three major arguments. First of all, Saudi Arabia is custodian of two holy places, Mecca and Medina. Secondly, the country is ruled by Islamic law given the specific alliance between Wahhabi clerics and the House of Saud. And thirdly, Saudi Arabia has enormous wealth given that it belongs to the world's largest oil producers and exporters. The aspiration for leadership in the Muslim world raises tensions with Iran, its regional rival that strives for a similar position within the Shiite world. One of the tools of Saudi Arabia to achieve its ambition is through international bodies, such as Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which Saudis depict as "*a unified voice for the Muslim world*". (Abueish, 2019). OIC's summits are regularly held in its headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to discuss current issues in the Muslim world. Besides OIC, Saudi Arabia is member of the GCC, a sub-regional international arrangement on the Arabian Peninsula, which gives Saudis the opportunity to strengthen its leadership over smaller Gulf monarchies. (Gray, 2014)

Al Arabiya's coverage of the Summit reflects all the above-mentioned aspects

of Saudi policy and its strategic interests. Its attempt to delegitimize the summit was in line with Saudi's concern that it might seek to replace already existing platform for dialogue among Muslim countries, the OIC. For Saudi Arabia, OIC based in Jeddah is too important for the accomplishment of its own strategic interests. Moreover, Al Arabiya's coverage of participating countries emphasizing negative aspects about Iran, Qatar and Turkey in particular, can be explained by their perception from Riyadh. They are regarded as regional rivals to Saudi Arabia and as a potential threat to the regional stability given their alleged pro-revolutionary stance and support for political Islam. Al Arabiya's emphasis of dangers of political Islam as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran and its incompatibility with the contemporary challenges of increasingly educated and globalized Middle East, serve Riyadh to delegitimize its rivals and their aspirations to solve Muslim problems, and at the same time, it serves Saudis to legitimize their own ambition to lead the Muslim world. Hence, Al Arabiya's coverage of the Muslim Summit directly reflects Saudi perception of regional dynamics, threats and its strategic interests.

## **Conclusion**

The article was testing the hypothesis that Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's coverage reflects state-sponsors' interests even in case of a non-conflict related issue such as the Muslim Summit. A comparative discourse analysis of articles published by both media revealed bias and several important discrepancies. The two media adopted opposed narrative when it comes to states participating at the summit, its agenda and the summit as such. Discrepancies stemmed from the use of manipulative techniques including ambiguities, half-truths, exaggeration or omission in order to deliver two very different messages. Al Jazeera sought to emphasize positive aspects about the Summit in order to persuade receivers that the Summit is a prestigious event that could help solve some of the challenges faced by Muslim world. On the other hand, Al Arabiya used manipulative strategies to emphasize negative aspects about the Summit in order to make receiver believe that the Summit is in fact a failed attempt of some pro-revolutionary states to eventually create a new alternative platform to OIC.

These opposed messages reflect contrasting interests of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. While Qatar strives for greater regional and global influence as well as greater emancipation and autonomy from Saudi Arabia by strengthening ties with some of Saudi rivals including Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia

strives for status quo and leadership in the Muslim world, beginning with small GCC states, including Qatar, while emphasizing the role of OIC in dealing with Muslim issues. The strategic objectives of the two states are thus incompatible, which makes Qatar and Saudi Arabia rivals also in the media space.

We thus validated the hypothesis that Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's coverage is in line with their respective state's interests even when it comes to the coverage of a non-conflict-related issue. Both websites used manipulative techniques when reporting about the Muslim Summit to deliver a biased message reflecting their state-sponsor's interests. We thus proved that the findings on Al Jazeera's and Al Arabiya's bias as pointed out by other studies are not restricted to the coverage of conflicts or crisis, yet they are applicable more broadly. Ultimately, this article also suggests a possible way how state-sponsored media could be approached in order to understand their biased message. In this context, qualitative method stemming from manipulative strategies and ideological square as defined by **Blass** and **van Dijk** proved to be useful instrument. To conclude, given that both Arab media networks serve as political instruments of their sponsor state, understanding their bias and delivered message can reveal a lot about their respective country's political agenda and ambitions. Both thus can be a valuable source of information not only about happening in the Middle East and beyond, but the way how they inform about it, also reveals the attitude and strategic objectives of their state-sponsors.

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