

## **TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CONSPIRATORIALISM IN THE ARAB MEDIA SPHERE**

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### **Introduction**

The success of Donald Trump's presidential campaign is commonly regarded as the sign of a trend towards populist identity politics, which partly resulted from today's controversial immigration debates and increasing perception of threat to global security. This phenomenon appears to have primarily manifested itself in recent European elections and referendums, as illustrated by *Brexit* and the success of the *Front National* candidate in the first round of the 2017 French presidential campaign. However, there is also reason to believe that Donald Trump's approach to national identity and political communication impacted on some of the politically-driven ethnic and sectarian conflicts that occur in regions suffering high political instability, such as the Middle East. Therefore, in order to assess the significance of Trump's

populist discourse on the global political culture, it is worth investigating reactions to his foreign policy in the Middle East.

Some experts have already underlined the fact that Trump's controversial statements on Islam are likely to enhance anti-Western sentiment (Winter 2016; McKernan 2017) and that the inconsistency of his foreign policy raises further political uncertainty for the region (Burke 2016; Walt 2017). However, we still have yet to understand how his foreign policy is being framed to accommodate the distinctive media narratives that are competing in the Arab media sphere as well as how it is received in the regional public debate. Does Trump's foreign policy underpin diverging interpretations of the complex struggles for power that are currently at stake in Iraq and Syria and does this generate conspiratorialism (Hannah and Benaim 2016; Engel 2016)?

In order to reflect on these questions, this paper analyses a sample of news reports from *Al Ahram*, *Al Arabiya*, and *Al Jazeera*, covering four specific major events during Trump's early presidency. By evaluating how the news were originally framed and commented on by the media outlets' readership, the article attempts to investigate how President Trump's foreign policy discourse and positions are received and reported in the Arab media, and to what extent, if any, do they exacerbate the current climate of uncertainty engulfing the region and beyond. In theory, as we shall see, conspiracy theories thrive in such environments. The aim is to investigate whether or not the reality validates that theory.

### **Conspiracy theory and political uncertainty in the information age**

What is a conspiracy theory and how does one operate in today's global media environment? From the aftermath of the Cold War to the rise of the 2000s' digital revolution, social scientists have opposed two divergent approaches to the study of conspiracy theories, which differ in whether conspiracy theorists embrace or reject the status quo. The first, as described by Serge Moscovici in his essay "Conspiracy Mentality" (1987), is that of an irrational feeling of resentment expressed by the majority towards a minority. In this case, so-called conspiracists are commonly blamed for the fact that they do not conform to the norm and are therefore regarded by the compliant majority as unfairly privileged. From this perspective, conspiratorialism is to be understood as "the psychology of resentment" (ibid. 162). It manifests itself as a prejudice towards the minority, which is induced by a rather "ethnocentric and dogmatic" (ibid. 154) form of social identity. As a result, resentment often manifests itself as a fear of the other and the foreigner, who potentially represent a threat to social cohesion. This

perceived external threat endorses all sorts of phantasmagoric representations meant to emphasize the supposedly inexorable incompatibility between the in-group and the outsider (ibid. 163).

The alternative perspective can be found in the work of Parish and Parker (2001) and Dean (2000), who define conspiracy theory as a reaction to the uncertainty of the modern world (Parish and Parker 2001). In their view, conspiracy theory evidences one's ability to question the apparent truth and seek for a hidden meaning, however subjective or superstitious, of our social reality. Their conception of conspiracy theory is that of a cognitive process that potentially challenges the norm and allows one to think critically about the world.

This certainly demonstrates that what may be defined as a conspiracy theory remains intrinsically relative. In spite of this, researchers agree to define conspiratorialism by a common set of characteristics, such as paranoid skepticism, a tendency to displace responsibility for social problems (Showalter 1997), a feeling of insecurity, and a propensity to position oneself as a victim (Moscovici 1987: 163; Parker 2001: 198). The latter tradition however pays particular attention to how conspiratorialism relates to postmodernity and to the climate of anxiety generated by economic globalization and the emerging technoculture (Stewart 1999; Dean 2000). In this regard, Dean introduces a relevant reflection as to how today's increasing consumption of information might ironically intensify our feeling of uncertainty:

[I]nformation does not necessarily correlate with clarity and transparency, not to mention goodness and accountability. (...) Information may obfuscate even more than it clarifies. This is an important insight today, the technocultural "post" to postmodernity. It reminds us that telling the truth has dangers all its own, that a politics of concealment and disclosure may well be inadequate in the information age. (Dean 2000)

This inevitably brings us to reflect on the relationship between conspiratorialism and the possible revival of information warfare. As argued by George Marcus (1999), it is a context similar to that of the cold war and characterized by information warfare and political uncertainty that precisely explains today's propensity to individual skepticism:

[T]he cold-war itself was defined throughout by a massive project of paranoid social thought and action that reached into every dimension of mainstream culture, politics, and policy. Furthermore, client states and most regions were shaped by the interventions, subversions, and intimidations pursued in the interest of global

conspiratorial politics of the superpowers. The legacies and structural residues of that era make the persistence, and even increasing intensity, of its signature paranoid style now more than plausible, but indeed, an expectable response to certain social facts (ibid. 2).

Assuming that today's conspiratorialism is, indeed, part of the legacies of the cold war, how does it fit within the recent interplay of proxy wars currently at stake in the Levant region? How does it react to superpower foreign policy in the information age, and how does it operate when different media narratives compete on the transnational scale? In order to explore some of these questions, this paper shows how Trump's positions regarding foreign policy in the Middle East evolved since the 2016 presidential campaign. It examines how this may intensify the current climate of political instability in the Middle East and investigates how Trump's foreign policies in relation to the global security crisis have been reported by three distinctive Arab media outlets. Finally, by outlining the preliminary results of a thematic analysis conducted on a dataset of online readers' comments, this paper introduces a reflection as to how Trump's political communication impacts on the polarization of the political debate in the MENA region.

### **Trump's foreign policy before and after the election: political uncertainty rising in the Middle East**

Many of President Donald Trump's actions following his assumption of power in January 2017 stand at odds with his previous rhetoric on the earlier campaign-trail. The areas of foreign policy in which President Trump has reversed course are plenty, including his policy on NATO, the European Union, China, North Korea, and Russia. However, we will narrow our focus, for the purpose of this paper, to those pertaining to the Middle East region. With regards to the main Middle Eastern issue at the moment, the revolution turned civil war in conflict-ridden Syria, candidate Trump was very critical of any US involvement during the Obama years and wanted to stay out of it (Griffing 2017; Jacobs 2015). However, President Trump proved willing to enforce the red line drawn by his predecessor, President Obama, with his first major military airstrike hitting the Syrian airbase from which the Syrian president's planes launched the Khan Sheikun chemical attack, which killed more than 80 people in early April 2017 (*BBC News* 2017).

A couple of months later, on June 19, a Syrian army jet was shot down by a US warplane, which was framed by Russia as "an act of aggression" (Reuters and Haaretz 2017). This has put

President Trump on a collision course with Russia, a country that has entered the war in Syria in support of the regime in Damascus. Russia was at the receiving end of Trump's soft approach and kind gestures during the campaign, thus fueling perceptions of a collusion between the two. However, during a press conference in April, President Trump said, "We are not getting along with Russia at all. We may be at an all-time low in terms of a relationship with Russia." While candidate Trump indicated that he would look into lifting the sanctions against Russia (Pager 2016), President Trump actually approved and signed a Russian sanctions bill in early August, prompting a Russian retaliation by ordering hundreds of US diplomats to leave the country (Tracy 2017), resulting in a tit-for-tat US response.

Regarding Iran, a blend of tough talk and targeted sanctions characterize both Trump's campaign rhetoric and the first 100 days of his administration. However, while he promised during the elections to tear up the nuclear Iran deal, he has yet to do that as of the time of writing this paper. Moreover, while candidate Trump, following the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, called for a temporary ban on all Muslims to enter the US (Revesz and Griffin 2016), he, as president, issued a much narrower travel ban blocking migrants from only seven countries linked to concerns about terrorism, and then six after exempting Iraq, for a period of 90 days (Schear and Cooper 2017; Trush 2017).

With regards to the Arab Gulf states, apart from fleeting mentions about how he thought they should contribute more financially towards the stability and security of the region, candidate Trump did not elaborate on the nature of the relationship that he envisions or his opinion on his predecessor's "share the neighborhood" attitude to power politics—between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in particular. However, he chose Saudi Arabia to be the destination of his first foreign visit, from where he articulated his vision of "peace, security, and prosperity—in this region, and in the world" (The White House 2017). Despite President Trump briefly mentioning Qatar as "a crucial strategic partner" in his Riyadh Summit speech, he strongly supported the boycott imposed on it by the quartet of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia a week later. He tweeted that it is "so good to see the Saudi Arabia visit with the King and 50 countries already paying off. They said they would take a hard line on funding extremism and all reference was pointing to Qatar."

President Trump was propelled to victory on a wave of nationalist and populist sentiments sweeping across the West. While his campaign promises to put "America first" played a huge part in his appeal and success, it caused a great deal of anxiety in many US friends and allies

around the world who started to fear that their relationship with the world's superpower could be jeopardized by divisive identity politics and protectionist ambitions. To those who were worried about his earlier rhetoric, it is positive that, as president, he reversed course on most of the controversial issues addressed earlier. To others who expected him to herald a break with traditional American foreign policy, this was certainly a disappointment.

In both cases, one could easily argue that Trump's unpredictable approach to foreign policy—and possible lack of long-term vision—implicitly calls for a remolding of political alliances in a region that has been suffering from political instability since 2011. Most importantly, beyond strictly geopolitical concerns, the inconsistencies of Trump's administration (both over time and among the members) is likely to have an impact on public opinion, by encouraging conspiratorialism in an environment where diverging media narratives are already competing on both the national and regional scale. Indeed, as the conspiracy literature mentioned above would suggest, conspiratorialism may be interpreted as the urge to explain the unexplainable, especially in a context of insecurity or the perception of threat. The process through which Trump has been shifting his position from the 2016 presidential campaign to the early stage of his presidency most certainly remains incoherent and can easily be considered as inexplicable by those, in the Middle East, who experience a strong feeling of insecurity today.

#### **Four media events covering Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East**

In order to better understand the dialectic between Trump's foreign policy and the media narratives currently competing in the Middle East, the preliminary findings outlined in this chapter focus on four media events relayed in three Arab media outlets. The former have been selected to map the evolution of Trump's foreign policy in the region in the early stage of his presidency. Therefore, when analyzed together and chronologically, they reveal the inconsistency and lack of rationality pervading Trump's political stand *vis-à-vis* the Middle East, which, as per our hypothesis above, potentially offers more grounds for conspiratorialism.

The four media events we considered are:

1. November 2016 US presidential election concluding the controversial campaign, during which candidate Trump alluded to Islam as a vehicle for terrorism and welcomed the possibility of strengthening the US's relationship with Russia.
2. The Executive order issued on March 6, 2017, following on from the January 27 travel ban, which prevented entry to citizens from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

The new travel ban excluded Iraq from the list of seven Muslim--majority countries initially blocked.

3. US forces bombing the Syrian pro--Assad airbase, from which the Khan Sheikhun chemical attack against civilians was launched in April 2017.
4. President Trump's speech at the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh, which took place as part of Trump's first foreign trip in May 2017.

In order to investigate the coverage of these events across the region, we explored how they have been reported in three major Arabic media outlets representative of different political agendas in the Arab media sphere. A dataset of news reports relaying some of the events listed above has been published on the media's online portals along with a set of readers' comments. The three news sources were the state--owned Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, the Saudi news satellite channel *Al Arabiya*, and the Qatari channel *Al Jazeera*.

- *Al Ahram*—The Egyptian daily newspaper was originally founded in the late nineteenth century and is amongst the most influential and popular media outlets in the Arabic press. It has occasionally been criticized for being the subject of censorship and endorsing the views of the military elite. In addition to the daily printed version, the newspaper is now published online via its news platform *al Ahram Gate*.
- *Al Jazeera*—Since 1996, Qatar's state--owned satellite channel *Al Jazeera* has promoted itself as an independent and unbiased news source, claiming to deliver alternative information to that of Western and state--owned Arab media. However, *Al Jazeera's* critical stance against local governments and Western powers and its support of political Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, along with its lack of any critical coverage of local Qatari issues, have discredited its claim to impartiality. In fact, many argued that the global news organization has contributed to the relative success of the Islamist opposition in countries that undertook a political transition following the 2011 uprisings. The media outlet was, in this regard, part of the reason why other Gulf states accused Qatar of underpinning terrorism, by supporting transnational political Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and giving a platform to other more sinister groups and organizations, such as al--Qaeda.
- *Al Arabiya*—The pan--Arab news website and TV channel owned by the private Saudi media group MBC was launched in 2003. Experts commonly agree that the channel had been initially created to act as the direct competitor of the Qatari channel *Al Jazeera* and as a way to promote a more critical perspective on political Islamist opposition groups. *Al Arabiya* faced particular criticism from officials of two Shia majority countries, namely Iraq and Iran. Along with its sister channel *Al Hadath*, the channel was criticized for raising criticism against the two

governments—especially after the 2014 breakdown of Iraqi military forces in Mosul. In both countries, reporters were occasionally banned and the channel was threatened to have its local offices shut down.

The three news sources act as the voice of different kinds of leadership in the Gulf and North Africa, while reaching an equally large and diversified Arabic-speaking audience. As a result, one can expect that the process through which they frame US foreign policy—and Trump’s administration in particular—may vary and potentially relate to different narratives. Their coverage of our chosen events is highlighted in Table 1 below and will be discussed specifically within the following context.

In Egypt, despite public opinion remaining highly polarized in the aftermath of the July 2013 coup, the pro-military government celebrated the election of Trump, whom they regarded as a stark alternative to the Obama administration and a more reliable shield against the Muslim Brotherhood. In an interview published in November 2016 by the pro-military Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram*, the Lebanese-born American campaign advisor to Trump Walid Phares referred to the candidate as the representative of the silent majority—in both Egypt and the US. Phares emphasized the fact that Trump had developed strong ties with President Sisi, calling him an “ally of moderate Arab and Islamic forces.”

Table 1: News report dataset

Dataset						
	Media	Title	Date	Numb. of comments	Event	Type
1	Al Ahram	ترامب بيطيح برافضي تطبيق قرار التت حظر اللاجئين ..	January 2, 2017	4	Immigration ban	News
2	Al Jazeera	ترمب يوقع المراا جديداا بشأن الهجرة بيستههدف دوولا مسلمة	March 3, 2017	10	Immigration ban	News
3	Al Ahram	«الاهههر امم » بيرصد من نيويوررك الساعات الأخيرة للانتخابات الأمريكية	November 7, 2016	0	US presidential elections	Interview
4	Al Ahram	دوونالد ترامب ررئيساً للولايات المتحدة الأميركية	November 9, 2016	1	US presidential elections	News

5	Al Arabiya	ددونالد ترمب ررئيساً للولايات المتحدة الأميركية	November 9, 2016	25	US presidential elections	News
6	Al Jazeera	ترامب ررئيساً للولايات المتحدة	November 9, 2016	41	US presidential elections	News
7	Al Arabiya	خطاب ترمب من الرياض...حديث عن ووحدة في وجهه التطرف	May 20, 2017	1	Riyadh speech	News
8	Al Jazeera	خطاب ترمب في القمة العربية الاسلامية الامريكية	May 22, 2017	4	Riyadh speech	News
9	Al Jazeera	قصف أميركي بعشرا الصواريخ على مطار قرب حمص	April 7, 2017	51	Syrian military base airstrike	News
10	Al Arabiya	أمريكا تهجم النظام السوري بـ 59 صاروخاً	April 7, 2017	132	Syrian military base airstrike	News
11	Al Ahram	قصف قاعدة «الشعبير التت» الجوية بـ 59 صاروخ توماههوكك.. ومقتل 9 مدنيين .. مصر تدعو أميركا ورروسيا للتحرك لإنهاء الأزمة السورية	April 8, 2017	4	Syrian military base airstrike	News
12	Al Arabiya	ترامب يوقع أمراً حول الهجرة وويستثني العراق	March 6, 2017	5	Immigration ban	News
13	Al Ahram	تداعيات قرار ترمب «حظر السفر»	February 8, 2017	0	Immigration ban	Editorial

As mentioned above, the political tensions that were about to manifest themselves between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in June 2017 had apparently not been anticipated by the US president at the time of the 2017 Summit in Riyadh. This prompts the thought that Trump's relationship with Qatar may not have been as well-defined as his relations with the Egyptian military regime, and one could argue that Al Jazeera's coverage of the presidential campaign indicates that the country's leadership implicitly supported the Democrats (*Al Jazeera English* 2016).

Alternatively, despite referring to candidate Trump as "a disgrace (...) to all America" in a tweet prior to the election, Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, was, with President Sisi, amongst the first leaders to congratulate Trump for his victory. On the eve of the US president's official trip to Riyadh, the two countries appeared to have "revitalised [their] friendship" and come to

an agreement with regards to intensified military action in Yemen and the revival of a traditionally confrontational US foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Iran (Malsin 2017).

### **Media framing and readers' comments:**

- **Trump's election:**

While both *Al Arabiya* and *Al Ahrām* remained largely factual and on point in their reporting on Trump's victory in the race to the White House, *Al Jazeera* tried to explain Trump's win by arguing that "despite polls showing that 60 per cent of Americans do not consider Trump fit to be president, the controversial republican candidate won the support of many voters who were disgruntled with Obama's policies." In the same news report, *Al Jazeera* highlighted the many controversial statements that Trump made regarding his foreign policy for the Arab world, such as "his call for the reoccupation of Iraq and the seizure of its oil to confront the Islamic State organization." In short, by including in its reporting statements that Trump is "classified as being very close to the far-right in the Republican party" and "he is known for his hostility to immigrants in America, especially those who come from Mexican origins," *Al Jazeera* referred to the new US president in more negative terms.

Across the dataset, the news of Trump's election appears to have generated a commonly diversified set of comments. On the one hand, some posts stand out for suggesting—in a sarcastic tone—that Trump's administration will jeopardize US democratic values and accommodate the military authoritarianism that had been challenged by the 2011 Arab uprisings. Another category of readers' inputs, on the other hand, celebrates Trump's election and welcomes the end of Obama's administration. The most liked comments on *Al Jazeera's* piece celebrate Trump's win because "he will herald the end of America and the end of the world". The majority of *Al Arabiya's* comments, 15 out of a total of 25, were celebratory of Trump's win, congratulating him and hoping for a better future. Only three wished that Hillary had won. The single comment on *Al Ahrām* expressed joy that "the supporter of Israel and the [Muslim] Brotherhood (...) and the so-called Arab Spring that caused wars and destruction in our region," meaning Clinton, did not win. The commenter continued to predict that Trump will certainly change after his election just like his predecessors before him.

- **Immigration ban:**

In February, editorialist Dr. Ahmed Sayed Ahmed accused Trump's executive order of fueling a clash of civilizations in an *Al Ahrām* piece that surprisingly contrasted with the interview of Trump's campaign advisor published by the same newspaper prior to the US election. Both *Al*

*Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* remained relatively factual when reporting the ban. However, whereas *Al Jazeera*'s news report emphasized the popular demonstrations opposing the order, *Al Arabiya* focused on the security concerns related to the ban.

Between January and March 2017, Trump's immigration ban generated equally strong reactions amongst the readership of the three news sources. Across the dataset, this particular media event generated highly critical comments reflecting the controversial nature of the law. The US was repeatedly called a racist state, and some readers suggested that similar restrictions should be applied in the cases of US nationals willing to enter Arab states. Some comments called for boycotts of US products and for improved relationships with alternative powers such as Russia, which—in the latter case—could be considered as implicitly revealing pro-Assad views. The news of the new executive order issued in March 2017, which excluded Iraq from the original list of seven countries impacted by the ban, reactivated the debate on the US relationships with Shia-majority countries. A few posts, especially on *Al Jazeera*, suggested that US foreign policy catered to the interests of the latter, and that exempting Iraq—as suggested by more than one reader—will allow “Shi'a terrorists from Iran, Lebanon and Yemen” to enter the US with an Iraqi passport, as “the US supported and continues to support the Iranian occupation of Iraq since 2003.” Another reader commented on *Al Arabiya*'s reporting that the exemption of Iraq is evidence that the decision is illogical:

“how can Iraq be included for clear reasons and then exempted days later?”.

- **The bombing the pro-Assad military airbase:**

*Al Arabiya* news report called US strikes on the pro-Assad military airbase a proportionate response to the chemical attacks on Khan Shaykhun. It underlined the measures taken to avoid civilian casualties by quoting statements from US Defense Department spokesman Jeff Davis and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. *Al Jazeera* addressed the event by focusing on its impact on US-Russian relations and the possible repercussions in terms of military action. It reported statements from the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vladimir Savronkov, and relayed information from a local correspondent and the Syrian state television, so as to cover reaction to the events on the ground. *Al Ahram*, on the other hand, highlighted, in its headline, the Syrian press agency's allegation that the bombing killed nine civilians. It also stressed Egypt's official position calling for the US and Russia to work together to put an end to the Syrian crisis.

Based on the three news reports from *Al Arabiya*, *Al Jazeera*, and *Al Ahram* considered in our sample, this particular media event proves to have generated the highest number of comments

within the dataset. Reactions also appeared to be highly polarized, as they conveyed both skepticism of Trump’s motivations and joy and enthusiasm at the thought of repressive measures against the Syrian regime. In this context, a significant proportion of comments suggested that the bombing was “a cheap ploy” designed as part of a strategy to alleviate internal pressure in the US, showcase the West’s “humanitarianism,” and divert attention from the possible interference of Russia in the US presidential election. This category of comments appears to have been particularly critical about the fact that Russian forces had been informed of US intentions to attack the airbase and the operation had been conducted so as to reduce the risks for Russian and Syrian airport staff. As a result of *Al Jazeera*’s news report framing the event in relation to the broader-spectrum of political alliances involved in the conflict, its readers commented on the consequences of the bombings for the different military powers involved. More specifically, comments expressed resentment for Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah due to their support to the military regime, sometimes questioning the involvement of Israel and its security concerns relating to arms smuggling in the North of Lebanon. The most disliked comments on both *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera* are those few comments defending the Syrian regime and its Iranian patronage, while the most liked, especially on *Al Arabiya*, are those showing support for the attack and expressing hope that this will herald the end of the Iranian “destructive” influence. The very few comments on *Al Ahram* were not supportive about the bombing. One reader asks, “[H]ow does killing more civilians contribute to solving problems? It is obvious that Trump is trying to divert attention from the scandals surrounding his administration.”

- **The Riyadh Summit speech:**

*Al Jazeera* published a transcription of Trump’s speech at the Riyadh Summit after summarizing the main topics addressed at the event with an emphasis on global security issues, sectarianism, and the economic agreements between the US and Saudi Arabia on the eve of the summit. Just before the start of the transcription, it also highlighted that the writer of the first draft of the speech, according to its correspondent, was Steven Miller who is “a known conservative right wing, and one of the most hostile to Muslims and immigrants, and a believer in the superiority of the white race.” In doing so, it contributed to portraying Trump as unlikely to embrace the Arab Islamic perspective, bringing its readers to question his legitimacy in the particular context of the summit.

*Al Arabiya*'s report focused on Trump's call for unity to confront extremism and fight terrorism and on the part of his speech where he denied coming to the summit to give a lecture or teach people how to live or worship. Instead, as he himself said, "[W]e are here to offer partnership—based on shared interests and values—to pursue a better future for us all."

*Al Ahrām* did not report directly on the Riyadh Summit's Trump speech, but focused instead on the speech given by President Sisi.

In contrast with Trump's speech, three out of the four posts commenting on *Al Jazeera*'s news report manifested sarcasm and resentment against Trump, calling him ignorant and unable to comment legitimately on issues relating to politics and religion in the Middle East. Readers also expressed discomfort at the thought that the US president could condemn sectarianism, despite being involved in the military and political reshaping of the region. In contrast, one single comment was added to *Al Arabiya* news report, welcoming President Trump in Saudi Arabia.

## **Conclusion**

Admittedly, with the exception of editorials and opinion pieces, our dataset indicates that all three media outlets provide, in all appearances, a factual account of US foreign policy. Nothing, in terms of media framing, would suggest that any of the three media outlets is feeding a particular conspiracy theory. However, *Al Jazeera* undeniably distinguishes itself by referring to the US in more critical terms. Alternatively, *Al Arabiya* delivers a perspective which is more in line with the US government's narrative, by relying specifically on US official sources. *Al Jazeera* appears to be more inclined to discuss US foreign policy in relation to the way that other international powers position themselves *vis-à-vis* the Syrian crisis. Its news reports may, for instance, refer to statements of Russian officials or local correspondents in Syria commenting on the position of the Syrian regime. The approach of the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahrām* to US foreign policy proves to be less consistent. This indicates that, despite Trump and Egyptian President Sisi equally prioritizing—and potentially capitalizing on—domestic and global security issues, Trump's administration remained, in its early stage, relatively controversial in the Egyptian public debate.

Within the scope of our dataset, the distinctive ideological inclinations of these media outlets, however perceptible, do not appear to have a direct impact on readers' comments. All three media outlets generate an equally diversified set of comments, from which conspiratorialism

almost consistently evidences the intensively divisive Shia–Sunni conflict. In this context, conspiracy theory is therefore to be understood in the sense of resentment (Moscovici 1987). As it is debated by media audiences, the inconsistency of Trump’s foreign policy proves to conveniently enable multiple and often selectively diverging interpretations of the geopolitical interests at stake in the region. However, instead of generating a constructive critique of the status quo (Dean 2000), this form of conspiratorialism contributes to the fragmentation and polarization of the debate.

Had we focused on other more universally controversial events, such as the attacks of 11<sup>th</sup> September or the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, we would have presumably encountered conspiratorialism on a larger scale. The Middle East is a region plagued with conflict, chaos, and instability. In such an environment, it is easy to understand why some people resort to the defensive psychological mechanism of “externalization,” whereby they locate and project their problems onto an external other. External factors have played a role in many of the region’s ills, but it has become increasingly difficult to demarcate, in the face of the current state of ambiguity and uncertainty, between fallacious conspiracy theories and legitimate criticism relying on rational arguments.

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