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Framing what's breaking: Empirical analysis of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya Twitter coverage of the Gaza-Israel conflict

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Introduction

In coverage of Palestine, implementation of the journalistic principles of objectivity and impartiality is often questionable, especially when it comes to regional state-owned media corporations. This trend of state bias may be observed in the Middle East, where two prominent media networks - Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, owned by Qatar and Saudi Arabia respectively - are considered tools of soft power for their state-sponsors. A good deal of scholarly literature has examined Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya's coverage of numerous conflict and non-conflict related issues, ranging from the Israeli Occupation of Palestine, intervention in Libya, the war in Yemen, and the blockade of Qatar crisis, to the coverage of Kuala Lumpur Muslim Summit.¹ These studies iterate the importance of understanding the narratives Arab media from very specific political contexts, as both networks advocate for their state's interests. Yet relatively few English-language studies have examined Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya's Arabic news coverage of the Palestinian struggle, especially on their social media platforms.^{2 3}

The Gaza-Israel conflict in May 2021 resulted in increased global awareness of the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine, and was accompanied by international scrutiny of western mainstream media's biased portrayal of the Israeli violence. On May 6, 2021, Israel's Supreme Court was due to rule on the eviction of 19 Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah, a small district some 500 meters from the Old City of Jerusalem. The situation escalated when Israeli police stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City – the third-holiest site in Islam – and wounded hundreds of Palestinian worshippers during several days of violence. Protests broke out across the occupied territories and inside Israel. The Palestinian faction, Hamas, which governs Gaza, launched rockets towards Israel after the Israeli government missed a deadline to remove its forces from the mosque compound. The situation escalated into an 11-day bombardment of Gaza, killing at least 248 Palestinians, 12 people in Israel, and decimating a significant portion of the Gaza strip's infrastructure.

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Meanwhile, international protests against the Israeli apartheid began to gain traction online and offline, with hundreds of thousands of people from over 150 cities participating in solidarity with Palestine against the occupation. Western media was criticized by the international community for validating Israel's settler-colonial policies and perpetual aggression against the Palestinians. From heavy reliance on the passive voice and decontextualized snapshots to skewed terminology and misleading headlines, western media outlets were consistently called out for whitewashing Israeli occupation.⁴ Yet, western media's systemic bias against Palestinians in the latest round of violence comes as no surprise, with a vast body of literature existing to unpack coverage of preceding aggression in Palestine.⁵ While western media's biased coverage of the 11-day conflict turned heads and quickly led to multiple articles and studies, the framing of prominent regional media outlets like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were subject to scarcely any inspection.

The body of literature on Arab news coverage has done little to explain the nature of specific news frames embedded within Arab news coverage of Israeli state-sanctioned violence. In particular, little analysis exists to examine the types of coverage provided by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya's Twitter accounts. At a time when social networks have become a major instrument for the rapid dissemination of news, Twitter accounts have fundamentally changed the way we produce, spread, and break news. At time of publishing, each stand with 21 million and 2.5 million followers on Twitter for @AlArabiya_Brk and @AJABreaking respectively and provide their followers with the latest real-time newsworthy updates. Based on this reality, the paper aims to examine the hypothesis that Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya's coverage of the Israeli occupation of Palestine reflects the interests of their state-sponsors; yet, in contrast to existing literature, we will take the media outlets' Twitter breaking news accounts as the medium of analysis.

After contextualizing the latest Israeli war on Gaza within broader regional developments, this paper will describe the methodology and ultimately examine and dismantle the research findings in light of the changing regional dynamics. The month of May serves as the testing framework for this paper's hypothesis, where we will analyze and compare the content of tweets from the official Twitter breaking news accounts of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya to observe the narratives and

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better identify the bias.

This study, conceptually grounded in media framing theory, examines specific aspects of news framing of the Palestinian struggle. Rather than focusing on news publications, which are subject to heavy edits on a regular basis, this article aims to prove that breaking news tweets are a good proxy to examine what both media outlets consider as newsworthy, worthy of interrupting or “breaking” the Twitter user’s scroll. Through examining all the breaking news tweets of @AlArabiya_Brk and @AJABreaking in May, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively analyze the narratives delivered on Palestine, ultimately exposing the tight link between the framing of breaking news and the changing political dynamics in the region.

Research Question: How did state-sponsored media networks Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya frame the 11-day Gaza-Israel conflict in light of shifting regional political dynamics?

Background Information

Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – State-owned media

Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are prominent media corporations in the Middle East and major regional competitors in the media industry with geopolitical significance and global recognition. According to Forbes Middle East, Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera ranked as the top two TV Channels online in the Arab World, each respectively garnering 306.63 million and 277.8 million visits on their websites in 2021. Besides their powerful web service ranking, Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera retain a growing social media presence, with 21 million and 2.5 million followers on their breaking news Twitter Accounts, @AlArabiya_Brk and @AJABreaking respectively. Despite their increasing reach across different media, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were founded for opposing state-sponsored agendas and continue to be instrumentalized to shape different regional discourses.

Al Jazeera’s Arabic News channel was established in 1996 as a part of then-Emir of



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Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani's plans to enhance the regional and global influence of the Gulf State. Al Jazeera was expected to oppose the narrative of Saudi and Egyptian journalists who had been doubting the legitimacy of the new emir.⁶ Its global recognition increased after 9/11 and for its reporting in Afghanistan, providing timely and accurate coverage of underreported regions in the Middle East. Shortly after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Al Jazeera's English language website was established to tap into the English-speaking audience in the West and enhance the global prestige and significance of the small Gulf State.⁷ While Al Jazeera maintains that the funding by the Qatari government does not hinder its editorial independence, the network's full editorial autonomy has been called into question on multiple occasions. In 2010, the United States Department of State internal communications, released by WikiLeaks as part of the 2010 diplomatic cables leak, said that the Qatar government manipulates Al Jazeera coverage to suit political interests. Multiple studies prove the network's financial reliance on the royal family of Qatar for operational costs every year, despite the network's independence claims.⁸ In this light, Samuel Azran depicts Al Jazeera as a hybrid state-sponsored/private network that enables Qatar to shape international discourse.

As a response to Al Jazeera's criticism of Saudi's royal family and domestic policy, Saudi-owned and Dubai-based Al Arabiya was established in 2003.⁹ Al Arabiya's official English website was launched in 2007 to reach a broader audience, with its official proclaimed mission aiming to "*deepen understanding of Arab societies, cultures, and economies.*"¹⁰ Yet, just as in the case of Al Jazeera, extensive research has concluded that Al Arabiya is largely under the control of the Saudi government and its discourse is in line with Riyadh's interests.¹¹ Al Arabiya was established through investment by Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), the Saudi-owned media conglomerate, as well as other investors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Persian Gulf states. Through MBC, Saudi Prince Abdulaziz bin Fahd and his maternal uncle Waleed bin Ibrahim al Ibrahim own and have control over Al Arabiya. State ownership was materialized following an Op-Ed published by then Al Arabiya English's Editor-in-Chief on 5 March 2015, calling for President Barack Obama to "*listen to (Israeli PM) Netanyahu*" when it comes to the threat imposed by the Iranian nuclear deal. As a response to this op-ed, the London Independent journalist Robert Fisk wrote on 6 March that the column would not have been

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published unless it was “*blessed by the Monarchy.*” By doing so, Fisk reiterated claims that Al Arabiya is the mouthpiece of the Saudi regime.

Government ownership continues to be a dominant ownership structure in the Arab region, with much scholarly literature examining how Arab governments continue to advance press laws, license laws, penal code, political ideology, and brute intimidation to ensure that media content adheres to governmental interests.¹² By studying news coverage of 2017 and 2018, with special focus on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya’s narratives during the Qatar diplomatic crisis, Adib Abdulmajid confirmed the persistence of this government ownership, concluding that both media networks are polarized to serve the political interests and goals of Qatar and Saudi respectively.¹³ Another study conducted by Dominika Kosarova analyzed the coverage of a non-conflict issue, the Muslim summit held in December 2019, revealing once again discrepancies in coverage between the two media networks. Kosarova asserts that while Qatar strives for “emancipation” from Saudi and greater global influence by strengthening ties with Saudi’s rivals, Saudi strives to maintain the status quo and the leadership in the Muslim world. She says the incompatible strategic objectives are mirrored in their media space rivalry.¹⁴ Elmasry’s content analysis of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya’s coverage of the 2008/2009 Gaza War, a.k.a. the “Battle of Al-Furqan” or “Operation Cast Lead” as named by Hamas and Israel respectively, contends that Al Jazeera’s narrative slanted towards Hamas, against Israel, Egypt, USA, and the United Nations, whereas Al Arabiya’s coverage went in the exact opposite direction. The authors concluded that these findings are in line with Qatar and Saudi’s foreign policies.¹⁵ In general, Al Jazeera is perceived as more anti-American and anti-Israel, while Al Arabiya is observed as harboring pro-Western sentiments.¹⁶

The radically changing geopolitical theatre of the post-Arab Spring has advanced competing visions for the region’s future, and this polarity was quickly translated into state-aligned media tension and propaganda. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain have condemned the Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and have supported counter-revolutionary forces against political pluralism. On the other hand, Qatar has supported the post-Arab Spring Muslim Brotherhood governments in Tunisia and Egypt. Shortly after the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis, Saudi Arabia was quick to ban hotels and tourist facilities



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from airing Al Jazeera news channels and threatened to punish violators with the closure of their facility and a fine of up to 100,000 Saudi Riyals (\$26,000). In a statement released a few days following the diplomatic dispute, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage ordered that “all channels from the Al Jazeera Media Network must be removed” and replaced with channels compatible with “those of official Saudi television”. Tensions did not stop at bans and intimidations but extended to different forms of propaganda, with Saudi and Emirati government-aligned media outlet Al Arabiya relentlessly promoting the narrative that Qatar was a state sponsor of terrorism, and the Qatari media outlet Al Jazeera equalizing UAE’s religious tolerance policies with support for idolatry. In December 2020, Emirati Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash even condemned Qatari media outlets for, as he claimed, impeding Gulf reconciliation. Interestingly, his comments came a few days after Al Jazeera said that dozens of its journalists were targeted by “advanced spyware sold by an Israeli firm” in an “unprecedented attack likely linked to the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.”

Although Qatar and Saudi Arabia overtly maintain that Israel must first sign internationally recognized peace agreements with Palestine for them to pursue normalization deals, cooperation between Saudi and Israel has become an open secret in recent years. Bearing in mind Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman’s friendship with Trump’s son-in-law and senior advisor, Jared Kushner, who led the Abraham Accord, and Saudi’s desire to fortify a united front against Iran, regional watchers believe that normalization prospects do not seem too far off. Yet, with Qatar trying to reposition itself as a key regional mediator, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani said that Qatar will pursue efforts to stop Israeli “aggression” against Palestinians and the Al-Aqsa Mosque with concerned parties. While Qatar’s relations with Israel date back to the 1990s, the equation has significantly shifted in recent times for different reasons, notably due to Qatar’s military alliance with Turkey and its support for Hamas. Contrastingly, Saudi Arabia and Israel share overlapping interests when it comes to undermining the influence of Iranian-backed proxies in Lebanon and Syria. Saudi Arabia seemed secretly interested in building on the momentum of the Abraham Accords, at least up until the latest 11-day Israel aggression. However, following recent escalations and Israeli aggressions in Palestine, Saudi Arabia reaffirmed its commitment to a sovereign



Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

With Qatar rebranding itself as less of an Islamist supporter and more of a regional mediator, and with Saudi seemingly revisiting its partnership with Israel, it is important to analyze how both countries' respective state-owned media outlets Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya have covered the latest violence in Palestine and what this may expose about regional dynamics.

Methodology

To test how Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya framed the 11-day Israeli aggression, we need to first elucidate framing theory. Framing in media theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process and structure the message. Framing focuses on how media draws the public's eye to specific topics — setting the agenda -- and then it takes a step further to create a frame through which the audience will deconstruct the information. This, in a way, justifies media as gatekeepers who mindfully collect, select, “organize and present the ideas, events, and topics they cover.”¹⁷ Entman (1993) explains that message writers use various devices — including word choice, visual images, placement of information, and associations, among other things — to carefully frame their message. When analyzing media bias, we rely on the assumption that the “*specific ways messages are packaged and delivered can influence how communication recipients comprehend and evaluate messages.*”¹⁸

Much attention has been given to the “digital apartheid”, or the systematic exclusion of certain communities from digital access through political policies, thereby making social media an essential unit of study.¹⁹ The latest 11 day Israeli bombardment generated a social media explosion, despite Big Tech's efforts to reinforce Israel's erasure of Palestine through systemic censorship and silencing tactics. While Instagram attributed these latest deletions to a “global technical issue,” Twitter claimed that its restrictions of the account of Palestinian writer Mariam Barghouti was an “accident”. In a recent talk hosted by Northwestern Qatar titled “Digital occupation in the war against Palestine”, the managing director at AJ+ Dima Khatib contended that Al Jazeera's “content was not censored on Twitter”, as compared to targeted censorship of their content on



Instagram. Based on this premise, this paper uses Twitter as the source of content for analysis.

Following Entman’s explanation of framing devices, this study uses a comparative content analysis to determine Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya’s Twitter news framing of the conflict. We collected all the tweets that were authored in May 2021 from Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya Arabic breaking news accounts (AJABreaking and AlArabiya_Brk respectively). We collected the tweets using the Twarc Python library. This period covers May 1 to May 31st , which would help capture the pre- and post-conflict periods. We then proceeded to identify all tweets related to Palestine by filtering all tweets that containing of the following tokens/ sub-tokens:

Token	Translation	Sample matching tokens	Translation
فلسطين	Palestine	فلسطيني فلسطيني فلسطيني فلسطيني فلسطيني	Palestinian, Palestinians, the Palestinian, ...
إسرائيل	Israel	إسرائيلية إسرائيلية إسرائيلية إسرائيلية إسرائيلية	Israeli, Israelis, the Israeli (feminine)
غزة	Gaza		
القدس	Jerusalem	القدس الشريف القدس الشريف القدس الشريف القدس الشريف	Jerusalem, person from Jerusalem, persons from Jerusalem
الضفة	Jarrah		
حماس	Hamas		
نتنياهو	Netanyahu		
الكنيست	Knesset	الكنيست	The Knesset
أبباس	Abbas		
الصهيونية	Zion	الصهيونية الصهيونية	Zionist, the Zionist
الاحتلال	Occupation	الاحتلال الاحتلال	The occupation, and the occupation

For the Palestine-related tweets, we analyzed their content using the following methods:

1. We identified the most used verbs and nouns in the tweets of both accounts. To identify verbs and nouns, we used the Farasa lemmatizer²⁰ and part-of-speech tagger.²¹ The Farasa toolkit achieves state-of-the-art



accuracies for both lemmatization and part-of-speech tagging.

2. We identified the most distinguishing lemmas that would discriminate between the tweet contents of both accounts. We assigned scores for terms using the product of the log of the term frequency in a set with the so-called valence score²², which captures the relative frequency of occurrence of a term in one set compared to another set²³. Given two

$$\text{score}(t) = \log\left(\frac{f_a(t)}{f_b(t)}\right) \times \text{valence}(t)$$

3. We manually labeled all the source types that the tweets cite. We identified 33 source types that include reporters on the ground, international organizations, and sources from different countries such as politicians and media sources.

Findings

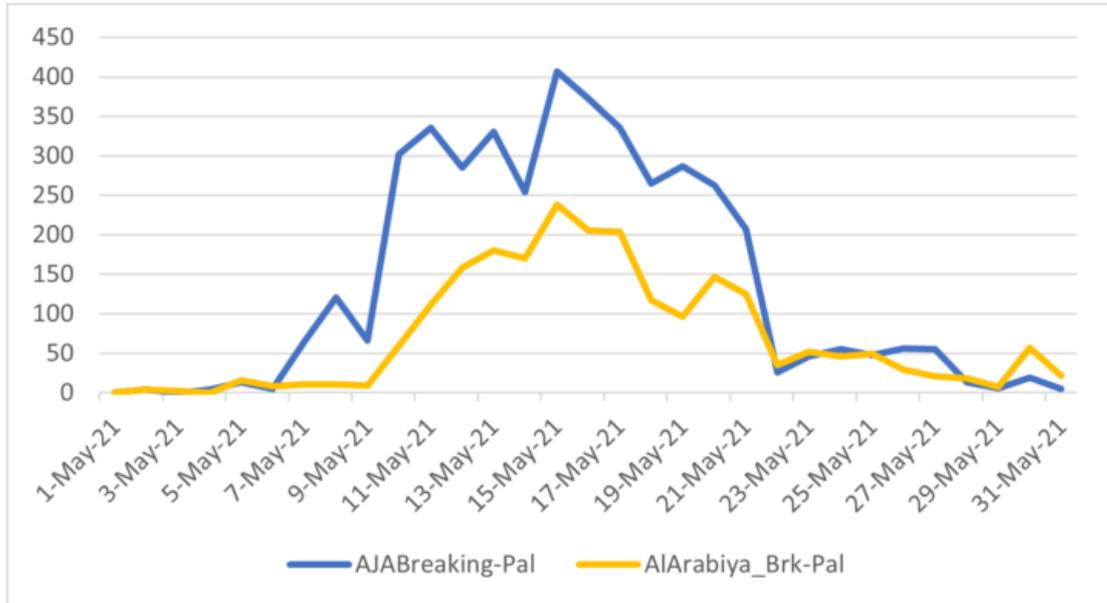
This study finds some stark differences and similarities in its content analysis of both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya’s breaking news Twitter accounts over the month of May. From the frequency of coverage, to the top cited sources, and the most distinctive terminologies, this paper utilizes comparative content analysis to determine the framing of the conflict.

Frequency of Palestine-related Coverage

This content study analyzes the frequency with which the two news networks covered Israel-Palestine in relation to the total number of tweets in the month of May. The number of Palestine-related tweets was 4,249 from AJABreaking (72.9% of all tweets) and 2,208 from AlArabiya_Brk (48.1% of all tweets). These are as follows:



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The frequency of Al Arabiya's tweets witnessed a steady increase between May 9 and May 13, later peaked to 238 tweets on May 15th . The peak witnessed an ongoing drop afterwards, only slightly fluctuating towards the end of May to reach a second maximum of 57 tweets on May 30. Comparably, Al Jazeera's increase in tweets began as early as May 6, to reach a maximum of 407 tweets on May 15. The frequency of tweets witnessed a sharp decrease afterwards, reaching 22 tweets on May 31.

The numbers of breaking news tweets by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya depict a consistent increase in coverage of Palestine during the month of May. While Al Jazeera started increasing coverage on May 6th , Al Arabiya caught up three days afterwards. Both networks witnessed a peak on May 15, later followed by a fluctuating decline towards the end of May. Nonetheless, the number of Palestine-related tweets by Al Jazeera remained significantly higher than those by Al Arabiya, sometimes reaching triple the number of tweets.

Sources Quoted

This analysis detects the information sources both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya cited most in their tweets. For the top two countries most referenced by Al Jazeera and



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Al Arabiya, this study also lists the exact organizations referenced by these sources. The sources quoted give us better insight into which organizations or countries both media networks are giving a platform to most. The table below illustrates the top countries and international organizations which Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya referenced most in their Palestine-related tweets:

Sources	Number of Al Jazeera tweets	Number of Al Arabiya tweets
Self-sourced	1237 (29%)	249 (11.2%)
Palestinian sources	872 (20.5%)	302 (13.7%)
Israeli sources	659 (15.5%)	392 (17.8%)
US	319 (7.5%)	198 (9%)
UN	67 (1.6%)	65 (3%)
EU	79 (1.9%)	52 (2.4%)
International media	45 (1%)	32 (1.4%)
Jordanian	71 (1.7%)	22 (1%)
Egyptian	36 (0.8%)	44 (2%)
KSA	13 (0.3%)	34 (1.5%)
Qatari	27 (0.6%)	0
Iranian	35 (0.8%)	8 (0.4%)
Turkish	70 (1.6%)	0
Russian	25 (0.6%)	12 (0.5%)

Al Jazeera’s top three news sources from all 4,249 Palestine-related tweets were Al Jazeera correspondents (29% of total tweets), Palestinian sources (20.5%), and Israeli sources (15.5%). On the other hand, Al Arabiya’s top sources from all 2,208 tweets were Israeli (17.7%), Palestinian sources (13.6%), and Al Arabiya correspondents (11.2%). For the top referenced countries Israel and Palestine, this study identifies which sources were exactly referenced.

The top five Palestinian sources cited by Al Jazeera were Al-Quds Brigades, Palestine Red Crescent Society, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the Ministry of Health, and Ismail Haniyeh. Al-Quds Brigades, the armed wing of the Palestinian Islamist organization Palestinian Islamic Jihad, was quoted in 89 tweets. The second most quoted reference was The Palestine Red Crescent, which was mentioned 78 times. The Ministry of Health, and the military wing for Hamas Izz ad-



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Din al-Qassam Brigades were both cited 74 times. Not too far off, senior political leader of Hamas Ismail Haniyeh was cited in 75 tweets, while Hamas was referenced in 58 other tweets. In total, around 110 different Palestinian sources were quoted by Al Jazeera in the month of May.

The most quoted Israeli sources by Al Jazeera were the Israeli army, Israeli Media, Netanyahu, and the Ministry of Defense. In total, the Israeli army was cited 160 times, while Israeli Media sources were cited 117 times. Former Prime Minister Netanyahu was cited in 111 tweets, and the Ministry of Defense 21 times. An estimate of 80 different Israeli sources were cited by Al Jazeera.

On the other hand, Al Arabiya's most referenced Palestinian sources were Palestinian media, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas. Palestinian media was referenced 66 times, while the Ministry of Health was quoted 57 times. The third and fourth most quoted were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Mahmoud Abbas, cited 30 and 28 times respectively. Lastly, Hamas was mentioned 24 times. Almost 40 different Palestinian sources were quoted by Al Arabiya during the coverage of the 11-day Israeli aggression.

Al Arabiya's top five cited Israeli sources were Netanyahu, the Israeli army, Israeli media, Ministry of Defense, and the Israeli Chief of Staff. Netanyahu was cited 106 times, while the Israeli army that was quoted 82 times. Israeli media was cited 63 times by Al Arabiya, and the Ministry of Defense was referenced 23 times. Finally, the Israeli Chief of Staff was cited 11 times. Roughly 55 varying Israeli sources were cited by Al Arabiya.

The fourth most cited sources in the breaking news tweets of both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were American sources, ranging from governmental officials to American media outlets (7.5% & 9% of all tweets by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya respectively). Both media outlets also cited the United Nations, European Union, and other international media sources like Reuters and Agence France-Presse (AFP). When it comes to the countries referenced most besides the US, Al Jazeera's top five sources were Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Qatar, in the order stated. Al Arabiya's were Egypt, KSA, Jordan, Russia, and Iran. The sources varied from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to governmental spokespersons, to local media outlets

of the respective countries.

Word Choice: Frequent & Distinctive Words

Media research suggests that word choice also dictates and reflect frames.²⁴ The present content analysis includes an examination of the most recurrent verbs and the most distinctive words used by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in their breaking news tweets.

The verbs identified by Farasa lemmatizer²⁵ and part-of-speech tagger²⁶ were then manually grouped into three different categories to better understand the biases and prevalent connotations of both media networks in the month of May. The table below identifies the 18 most frequently used verbs by both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, and categorizes them under: Aggressor-related verbs, self-defense-related verbs, and neutral verbs. Although there might have been more aggressor-related verbs or self-defense-related verbs used separately by each media outlet, this study chooses 6 verbs that were mutually used by both media outlets for the three categories.

Language	Aggressor-related verbs	Self-defense-related verbs	Neutral Verbs
Original (Arabic)	أطلق، قتل، استهدف، قصف، دمر، قتل	دعم، رفض، استعانة، استنصار، استشارة، استشارة	أعلن، قال، تحدث، استمر، أكد، أبلغ
English Translation	target, shoot, bombard, destroy, launch, kill	object, refuse, condemn, invite, support, rise	Announce, say, speak, continue, confirm, report

Al Jazeera’s top used verb was “استهدف، target”, an aggressor-related verb, used 339 times, while Al Arabiya’s most frequently used verb was “أكد، confirm”, a neutral verb, repeated 83 times. The 6 selected aggressor-related verbs were repeated 784 times by Al Jazeera, and 236 times by Al Arabiya. As for the self-defense-related verbs, Al Jazeera mentioned the 6 verbs 223 times, while Al Arabiya used them 148 times. The neutral verbs were repeated 256 and 190 times by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya respectively.

Given the large disparity between the frequency of usage of some words by both accounts, this paper also determines the most distinctive words used by Al Jazeera



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and Al Arabiya. In order to compute the ability of a word to distinguish between the accounts, we multiply the log of the frequency by the so-called valence score. As a result, this method establishes the difference between the raw frequency of a word and its ability to discriminate between both accounts.

AJABreaking				AlArabiya_Brk			
Most Distinguishing	Score	Most Count indicative	Score	Most Distinguishing	Score	Most Count indicative	Score
احتلال	5.92	هدنة	-1.95	هدنة	3.66	احتلال	-2.39
شهيد	5.16	قاهرة	-1.93	سعودية	3.60	بلدة	-1.46
مراسلة	5.01	وفد	-1.83	وفد	3.48	مراسلة	-1.03
مقاومة	4.94	إيران	-1.58	قاهرة	3.23	قسام	-0.95
كتيبة	4.55	سعودية	-1.04	أمريكا	2.92	كتيبة	-0.64
سرية	4.30	أمريكا	-0.65	إيران	2.71	سرية	-0.63
تركي	4.06	مهند	-0.61	عثيمين	2.48	جنوبي	-0.62
بلدة	4.05	لايد	-0.58	مهند	2.26	شاب	-0.59
قسام	4.03	بريطانيا	-0.58	ختامي	2.20	باب	-0.59
جنوبي	4.02	استيطان	-0.56	سلمان	2.01	عضو	0.00
متاخم	3.97	بحرين	0.00	اجتياح	1.95	مظاهرة	0.00
استشهاد	3.89	مرصد	0.00	لايد	1.83	مختلف	0.00
عدو	3.89	ملف	0.00	بريطانيا	1.83	بيرة	0.00
قطر	3.87	ريط	0.00	أميركي	1.79	دهس	0.00
قطري	3.71	غوتيرش	0.00	مفخخ	1.79	أشكول	0.00

Some of Al Jazeera’s most distinguishing words were “occupation, martyr, resistance, and enemy”. The term “occupation” was used 688 times by Al Jazeera to describe Israeli occupation, while Al Arabiya only repeated the term 14 times, thus making it a distinguishing term for Al Jazeera. Similarly, “martyr” was used 175 times by Al Jazeera to refer to Palestinian casualties, while Al Arabiya never used the term. Other distinguishing terms include resistance, and enemy which were repeated 140 and 49 times respectively by Al Jazeera yet were never mentioned by Al Arabiya. Interestingly, “الكتيبة” and “السرية”, both pertaining to Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades and Al-Quds Brigades were also among the most distinguishing words used by Al Jazeera, as both organizations were among the top Palestinian sources cited by Al Jazeera. Drawing parallels with the top cited sources, “القطري” and “القطري” also are, “Qatari and Turkish” to translates which, “القطري”

Al Arabiya’s most distinguishing words are “truce, Saudi Arabia, delegation, Cairo, and America”. This is unsurprising given that America, Egypt, and KSA were among the top countries cited by Al Arabiya. Nonetheless, there was significant emphasis by Al Arabiya on “القطري” or truce” which insinuates a ceasefire agreement. While Al Arabiya repeated “القطري” 62 times, Al Jazeera only mentioned it 9 times.



Discussion and Conclusion

The Gaza-Israel conflict in May 2021 came after weeks of mounting tensions over the looming forced expulsion of Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood in occupied East Jerusalem, that Jewish settlers have been trying to forcefully occupy for decades. The escalation resulted in great international awareness and solidarity with the Palestinian cause, accompanied by an even greater criticism of Western media's biased pro-Zionist framing. From this premise, this paper conducts a comparative content analysis of the coverage of the latest 11-day Israeli aggression by the two major Arabic-language media networks: Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. The framing devices that informed the research findings were frequency of coverage, sources cited, and word choice.

The number of Palestine-related tweets by Al Jazeera almost doubled those of Al Arabiya in the month of May. Their coverage started to significantly increase on May 6, three days before Al Arabiya's number of relevant tweets began to rise. Al Jazeera's coverage increased a few days before the violence of the occupation forces mounted, and was lengthier than that of Al Arabiya. The frequency and timings may indicate that senior producers at Al Jazeera ascribed a greater level of importance to stories in Palestine, thus offering more time-critical and extensive coverage of unfolding events in Palestine.

Al Arabiya was less likely to rely on self-reporting (11.2%) while Al Jazeera's information was self-sourced for the most part (29%). Al Jazeera's ability to devote a lot of field reporters and resources might stem from the fact that it is not a commercial venture, while Al Arabiya is owned by Saudi-controlled MBC group, a commercial venture, which may limit resources.²⁷ Nonetheless, Al Arabiya was more likely to rely on Israeli sources (17.8%), citing them 4% more than their second most cited, Palestinian sources (13.7%). Al Jazeera relied on Palestinian sources (20.5%) 5% more than Israeli sources (15.5%). While both media networks were seemingly determined to give a platform to both sides, Al Arabiya's coverage seems slanted towards the Israeli narrative, whereas Al Jazeera's towards the Palestinian.

A closer look at both networks' top sources furthers the discrepancies between the two narratives. Among Al Jazeera's top cited Palestinian sources were two armed



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wings of Islamist resistance organizations in Palestine. On the one hand, Al-Quds Brigades is the armed wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which is the second largest group in the Gaza Strip after Hamas. On the other lies Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of the Palestinian organization Hamas, the largest and best-equipped group operating within Gaza today. Ismail Haniyeh and Hamas were also significantly cited, mounting to a total of 133 citations. On the other end, The Ministry of Health and the Red Crescent, arguably among the more “neutral” sources, were also among the top sources. Nonetheless, Al Jazeera still appears to mostly give a platform to anti-Israel Islamist military organizations, much as earlier research on the network suggests. Just as with the Palestinian sources, the most quoted Israeli sources by Al Jazeera were military sources such as the Israeli army and Ministry of Defense. When put in conversation together, the majority of both the Israeli and the Palestinian sources are aggressive organizations dedicated to the demolition of the other side. Al Jazeera seems to be accentuating the Israeli violence and the Palestinian resistance.

Al Arabiya’s top cited Israeli sources were Netanyahu, the Israeli army, Israeli media, Ministry of Defense, and the Israeli Chief of Staff. As for Palestine, Al Arabiya’s most referenced Palestinian sources were Palestinian media, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and Hamas. It is thus apparent that the major Israeli references were much more military than the Palestinian sources that leaned towards the Palestinian Authorities (PA). This may on the one hand reinforce the Israeli narrative of self-defense and strengthen the calls for suspension of hostilities on the other. Netanyahu and Abbas’s significant citations could be attributed to the tight relationship between Israel and the PA that maintain security and funding ties. Otherwise, Hamas was most probably among the top cited for being a key player in the latest round of Israeli aggression, often launching fire rockets to saturate Israel’s Iron Dome and issuing direct calls for the 1948 Palestinians and the West Bank Palestinians to join the fighting.

In an attempt to better understand the dominant discourse by both media outlets, the top verbs and most distinguishing words used by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were detected. Al Arabiya’s use of aggressor-related, self-defense-related, and neutral verbs was nearly consistent. Al Jazeera’s use of aggressor-related verbs,



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however, was drastically higher than its use of other verbs. Both media outlets cited their respective states, Qatar and KSA, quite frequently in their coverage, further emphasizing the influence of governmental funding. Other distinguishing terms include “occupation, martyr, resistance, and enemy” to insinuate Al Jazeera’s harsh denunciation of Israel’s violence, and great sympathy and consideration of the Palestinian cause. On the other hand, Al Arabiya’s repetition of the word “truce” reveals its insistence on the ceasefire and de-escalation.

The most cited sources and most frequent wording show that Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya continue to prioritize of the narrative of their respective state-sponsors, especially within the broader context of normalization deals between Gulf states and Israel and the lifting of the blockade against Qatar. Neither Al Jazeera nor Al Arabiya emphasized on the narrative of the others’ sponsors, thus widening the gap between the two. In the broader context of normalization deals and the blockade, Al Jazeera also frequently cites Turkey and Iran, two of Qatar’s closest strategic regional allies. Iran is an all-consuming issue for Saudi Arabia; as the two countries are the chief antagonists in the Persian Gulf. In addition, given the financial and economic aid that Egypt desperately needs, and the Egyptian support that Saudi needs for their conflict with Iran, Al Arabiya’s persisting Egyptian citations could be reflective of the prosperous relationship between the two.

Seemingly, Al Jazeera continues to elevate the narrative of Palestinian resistance, while Al Arabiya leans towards the normalization rhetoric. A study at face value may suggest Al Arabiya’s neutrality, but a closer look at the exact terms and sources used in their tweets proves the opposite. Having examined the framing of the latest Israeli aggression in light of shifting regional dynamics, this study find that state-sponsored media outlets, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, continue to highlight the side of their respective governments. It also finds that Al Jazeera has significantly elevated and prioritized the Palestinian cause and the resistance narrative in its coverage, giving precedence to the Palestinian narrative over that of Israel. Al Arabiya, however, accentuates normalization speech and gives Zionists a platform and a loud voice. These outcomes may anticipate Saudi’s willingness to normalize relations with Israel and keep pushing for peace processes. Al Jazeera’s frequent citing of Islamist organizations may not be great for Qatar’s hopes of



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nullifying its reputation as an Islamist supporter. Yet, it consolidates its support for Palestinian resistance and liberation from Israeli occupation, and it elevates its stature among Arab audiences.

Additionally, this study aims to legitimize Twitter breaking news accounts as a critical unit of study and an important proxy for studying decontextualized media framings. The role of social media's fast coverage should not be underestimated in shaping the grander narrative and exposing state bias. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, both state-sponsored media, are emblematic of how these narratives are formed in the region. Further research could expand the scope of this study to include other news outlets or media platforms so as to obtain a more comprehensive view of narrative building via media in the region.



Endnotes

1. See: Gasim, 2018; Seib, 2012; Samuel-Azran, 2013; Miles, 2006; Joobani, 2014; Al Nahed, 2015; Baghernia, Mahmoodinejad, 2018; Elmasry, 2013; Abdulmajid, 2019; Kosarova, 2019.
2. See: Aqtash et al., 2004; Dajani, 2003; Elmasry, 2013; Mellor, 2005; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008.
3. (Alkalliny, 2019; Arikat, 2012; Chavez, 2019; Deprez, 2010; Dunsky, 2008; Elmasry, 2009; Friel and Falk, 2007; Handley and Ismail, 2010; Ismail, 2010, Philo, 2011; Thomas, 2011
4. Christou, 2021; Cherkawi, 2021; Jegic, 2021; Fernandez, 2021
5. Aqtash et al., 2004; Alkalliny, 2017; Deprez and Raeymaeckers, 2010; Dunsky, 2008; Elmasry, 2009; Friel and Falk, 2007; Handley and Ismail, 2010; Ismail, 2010; Kandil, 2009; Manning, 2003; Noakes and Wilkins, 2002; Philo, 2012; Philo and Berry, 2004; Richardson and Barkho, 2009; Thomas, 2011; Viser, 2003
6. Powers, 2012
7. Powers, 2012
8. Samuel-Azran, 2013; Almasry, 2013
9. Kraidy, 2006
10. Jabooni, 2014
11. Baghernia, Mahmoodinejad, 2018; Elmasri, 2013
12. Elmasry 2011; Cooper, 2008; Elmasry, 2012; Hafez, 2002
13. Abdulmajid, 2019
14. Kosarova, 2019
15. Elmasry et al., 2013
16. Elmasry et al., 2013; Zeng, Tahat, 2012
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18. Elmasry et al., 2013, p. 753
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23. Kareem Darwish, Peter Stefanov, Michaël Aupetit, and Preslav Nakov. "Unsupervised user stance detection on
 24. Elmasry, 2009; Entman, 1993
 25. Hamdy Mubarak, "Build Fast and Accurate Lemmatization for Arabic," In Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation, 2018.
 26. Kareem Darwish, Hamdy Mubarak, Ahmed Abdelali, and Mohamed Eldesouki, "Arabic pos tagging: Don't abandon feature engineering just yet," In Proceedings of the Third Arabic Natural Language Processing Workshop, 2017, (pp. 130-137).
 27. Elmasry et al., 2013



About the author



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