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Al-Mayadeen: The Construction of an Enemy Image

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Abstract: This article investigates how threat narratives and enemy images were constructed at the pan-Arab news TV station, *al-Mayadeen*, during the station's first year on air. I argue that the construction of an enemy image takes place as a fine interplay between threat narratives of existing political and ideological positions on the one hand, and current affairs on the other. *Al-Mayadeen* started broadcasting in 2012, counteracting both the new influential narratives of young activists calling for democracy, and the Sunni Islamist trend that followed; both groups became central elements in a process of 'Othering' at *al-Mayadeen*, dividing the Arab world into 'good' and 'bad'. *Al-Mayadeen* relaunched the question of Palestine, while the well-known threat narrative of Israel was equally promoted although adjusted to ongoing political and military developments in the region. Integrating the rising new actor, the Islamic State, a renewed enemy image was constructed where Israel and the Islamic State came to constitute two faces of the same enemy.

Keywords: al-Mayadeen, Arab media, Arab uprisings, enemy image, Othering, threat narrative

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Introduction

A new pan-Arab news media station was launched in June 2012, in the midst of the political turbulence of the Arab uprisings. The satellite TV station *al-Mayadeen* saw the light from its base in Beirut, with Ghassan bin Jeddo¹ as its CEO and front figure. Bin Jeddo had left *al-Jazeera* in April 2011, in frustration over – what he saw as – the station’s proactive and supportive coverage of the Arab uprisings in general, and of the Syrian one in particular. When bin Jeddo announced plans for launching *al-Mayadeen* a few months later, the project was firmly placed within the changing Arab political landscape of 2011, right from the very beginning.

Al-Mayadeen was born in a time when the Arab political world and public opinion were concerned with young activists who had taken to the streets, and on the other hand, the growing influence of Sunni Islamist political movements and militant groups. The station entered the media scene with the proclaimed aim to redirect the Arab attention back to Palestine, and the struggle against, what the station perceived as, Western and Israeli imperialism. Moreover, in contrast to the dominant political trends such as overthrowing old (often secular) authoritarian regimes and promoting Sunni Islamism, *al-Mayadeen* visibly supported the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and outspokenly rejected the growing influence of Sunni Islamism.

I investigate how *al-Mayadeen* established a perception of the world as divided into an ‘us’ (Self) and ‘them’ (Other) during its first years. This dichotomous division of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ was discursively constructed as a strategy to position itself and navigate within the upheaval of the Arab political landscape. I also discuss how this worldview facilitated the construction of a threat narrative and ultimately of an enemy image. I argue that, *al-Mayadeen* consciously worked with reconstructing a heroic image of the Palestinians while revitalising an old threat narrative of Israel by interweaving it with the Islamic State in a process of ‘Othering’. I thus show how the station’s broadcasts have constructed an enemy image by interlinking old and new threat narratives and by presenting them textually and visually as different faces of the same enemy.

I draw on three years of research on *al-Mayadeen*, in which I have focused on broadcasts and conducted ethnographic fieldwork at and around the station (Crone, 2017). The data were collected from September 2013 and the proceeding three years. While watching and analysing the programmes, I was interested in understanding the worldview behind *al-Mayadeen*’s editorial line. Thus, I wanted to capture and explore the ideological discourse that was formed and developed through the composition of broadcasts; what I have elsewhere referred to as The New Regressive

¹ Ghassan bin Jeddo is a well-known media figure in the Arab world. He was a central figure at *al-Jazeera*, being with the station almost from its first year. In addition to hosting the popular weekly show *Hiwar Maftuh* [Open dialogue], he also held the position as bureau chief of *al-Jazeera* first in Iran, and later Lebanon. He has long been known for his close ties to Hizbullah and his strong support of the resistance against Israeli occupation of Arab land.

Left (Crone, 2017, Crone, forthcoming 2020). In order to pursue this objective, I followed different cultural and societal programmes, as well as media events² and promotional material. This included – but was not limited to – the coverage of the Gaza war in 2014, the Ramadan programme *Harrir Aqlak* [Free Your Mind] broadcast in June and July 2015, and *al-Mayadeen*'s growing collaboration with the pan-Latin American news TV station *TeleSUR*, including their shared broadcast productions. I engage with these three elements in the present article as they each – and in different ways – deal with threats. Thus, I turn my attention towards one central aspect of The New Regressive Left, namely, how it divides the world into 'us' (Self) and 'them' (Other), and how it employs threat narratives and constructs enemy images.

In addition to content analysis of programmes, I draw on interviews, which I conducted during four trips to Beirut between 2013 and 2015, with relevant figures working at and around *al-Mayadeen*. I visited the main office building several times, sat in on shoots, and conducted interviews with 13 staff members, three former staff members, and seven stakeholders. I met some of the interviewees only once for an official interview, while I met others on several occasions – often at their workplace or at cafés, and sometimes in their private homes. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted in either Arabic or English, depending on the preferences of the interviewees. The interviews contribute to background knowledge and inside perspectives that help broaden the analysis.

Al-Mayadeen had produced large amounts of new material at the time of writing; however, this article is based solely on broadcast material from the station's first years on the air. That period constitutes a crucial time for Arab political life in general, and the establishment and consolidation of *al-Mayadeen* in particular.³ During this period, perceptions about 'good' and 'bad' were up for revision and negotiations, just as old enemy images were being challenged, and new ones were taking form. The collection of material thus took place while enemy images were being constructed. The article therefore contributes to a theoretical discussion about how such constructions take place in contemporary mass media.

I briefly sketch out below some overall features of the Arab media landscape that facilitate the construction of pan-Arab threat narratives and enemy images beyond a narrow nation-state perspective. This is followed by an excursion around *al-Mayadeen*.

² For example, when the station organized and hosted a big public celebration of the former Algerian freedom fighter, Jamila Bouhired, in the UNESCO Palace in Beirut in December 2013 (Crone, 2019).

³ I believe that focusing on the station's first years of broadcasting (2012–2015) offers unique insight into the process of enemy image construction in a crucial time for both *al-Mayadeen* and the Arab world at large. The time limitation, however, also means that, the analysis does not include later developments regarding enemy image construction at *al-Mayadeen*.

The Arab media context

The flow of information today is moving faster than ever across borders and populations, and the fight over public opinion has intensified. This is also true in the Arab world; while earlier media were subject to strong state control and censorship, the current situation partly undermines former state control with a vast number of state-owned and privately-owned satellite media combined with access to the Internet (most importantly, through smart phones). Nation-states only constitute one out of several disseminators in the Arab world and beyond. Cross-national identity groups, ideological and religious movements, and political alliances are also constantly making their voices heard. The same diverse groups of actors are concurrently all potential contributors to productions of threat narratives and enemy images, just as they are potential objects of other actors' narratives and images.

A shared language in the Arab world additionally facilitates a regional transnational flow of information and communication. This regional media scene developed during the late 1990s and early 2000s to such a degree that observers began talking about a shared pan-Arab public sphere; not least, the development within pan-Arab news production led by *al-Jazeera* was an important factor in the establishment of an Arab public sphere (Lynch, 2006). The Arab public sphere however, not only facilitates a contemporary news stream, but also collective memories, building on a (partly) shared history, culture and political context. The pan-Arab public sphere has been altogether an important arena for developing and maintaining threat narratives, and ultimately for constructing and disseminating enemy images across national borders – often with Israel starring in the lead role - although other regional and international actors have also appeared.

The growing numbers of pan-Arab media ensured a process of pluralisation during the first decades; since the uprisings, the Arab media has undergone a process of increased fragmentation (Lynch, 2012; Lynch 2015; Lynch et al., 2014). Political and ideological disagreements divided the Arab populations after 2011 and disintegrated the Arab public into echo chambers. According to Marc Lynch, the current media outlets more openly promote political agenda (often of their funders), while viewers tend to seek out like-minded sources. Thus, the post-2011 pan-Arab public sphere has not only stimulated division but also supported the production of threat narratives.

Al-Jazeera had maintained a special position as the media outlet that could unite most viewers across national borders and political beliefs up until 2011 – and in spite of the increasing pluralisation of the media landscape – and thus served as a shared point of reference in a pan-Arab public sphere (Lynch, 2006). One of the reasons that *al-Jazeera* was able to maintain a position as the pan-Arab media outlet, was the station's ability to bring together different voices representing Arab nationalists, Islamists, political liberalists, and leftists (Oifi, 2005, pp. 72–73). Staff and viewers united around a common agenda such as criticising Arab authoritarian

rule and Western imperialist behaviour, in spite of the different ideological outlooks at *al-Jazeera*, while the Palestinian cause and a general resistance discourse functioned as a shared focal point (Lynch, 2006).

The Arab uprisings, nevertheless, challenged *al-Jazeera's* former uniting role. The political reality in 2011 divided former allies across the Arab world. This was also the case on the editorial board at *al-Jazeera* and between the station's audiences. A number of journalists and other staff members, including Ghassan bin Jeddo, left the station due to disagreements over the editorial line on covering the uprisings, and the number of viewers decreased. The proactive coverage of events in Syria for example – for some, an important symbol of the last Arab bastion of resistance against Israeli occupation and Western dominance – triggered divisions (Cherribi, 2017; Abdul-Nabi, 2018).⁴ *Al-Jazeera's* editorial line likewise caused the end of its collaboration with *TeleSUR*.⁵ The two stations had been working together since 2006, exchanging media products and facilitating news coverage in the two regions (Ricco, 2012, pp. 3–5). Disagreements over how to perceive the Arab uprisings when they broke out in Syria brought the collaboration to an end (Ricco, 2012).

Three interlocked developments had taken place alongside these changes in the Arab media sphere, during the decades leading up to the uprisings.

Firstly, the centres of Arab media, historically Lebanon and Egypt, had moved to the Gulf (partly due to the Lebanese civil war).

Secondly, the general Islamisation of Arab society, which followed the failure of the authoritarian, secular nationalist regime, and the success of the Iranian revolution, started to move into the Arab media scene. While the cultural sphere had remained strongholds of secular values until the 1990s, the launch of the first Islamic channel (the privately-owned *Iqraa* Channel) in 1998 brought the general Islamisation of society on to the media platform (Galal, 2014; Skovgaard-Petersen, 2014). By 2011, Arab media had turned into an important arena for encounters between religious and secular forces (Nieuwkerk, 2008, Haugbolle, 2013) with Saudi Arabia aiming at dominating pan-Arab media (Yaghi, 2017).

Thirdly, since the Iranian revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabian and Iranian rivalry over regional leadership and influence in the Islamic world has been steadily growing, and only escalating since the Arab uprisings in 2011. The aspirations of the two states are founded on both ideological and geopolitical objectives, while the Sunni-Shi'a dichotomy is frequently played out to advance political ends (Mabon, 2013, Keynoush, 2016). Today, the conflict manifests in different political and military forms in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, for example, just as it is reflected in the

⁴ The Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* is another example of a media outlet that was divided over the Syrian conflict; for a discussion of this see: Hanssen and Safieddine (2016): 'Lebanon's *al-Akhbar* and Radical Press Culture: Towards an Intellectual History of the Contemporary Arab Left'.

⁵ *TeleSUR* is a pan-regional news station based in the capital of Venezuela. It was launched in 2005 on initiative of Hugo Chávez and can be seen as an example of Chávez's strategy to strengthening Latin America against US hegemony through collaboration (Hayden 2012, 132; Painter 2008, 45). In 2012 the station was owned by Venezuela (46%), Argentina (20%), Cuba (14%), Uruguay (10%), Bolivia (5%), and Ecuador (5%) (Ricco, 2012, p. 3). In respectively 2016 and 2018, Argentina and Ecuador withdrew their funds after elections and change of governments.

media landscape where religiously-based rhetoric is used by both sides to delegitimise the other, and gain regional influence (Yaghi, 2017). *Al-Mayadeen* was born within this context of political and media fragmentation. The establishment of *al-Mayadeen*, including its political positioning and financial set-up, is the focus of the following section.

Al-Mayadeen

A prominent figure at *al-Jazeera*, programme host and Beirut bureau chief, Ghassan bin Jeddo, resigned on 11 April 2011. Bin Jeddo left *al-Jazeera* accusing the station of serving as “an operation room for incitement and mobilisation” (As-Safir, 2011). His support for the resistance against Israel, and sympathy for Hizbollah was well known; and his frustration with *al-Jazeera* was connected to its proactive coverage of the Syrian uprising. When *al-Mayadeen* was launched a year later in June 2012 with the telling slogan, Reality as it is [al-waqa’a kamma hua], many expected this ‘reality’ to reflect the interests of the Iranian or Syrian states.

From day one, *al-Mayadeen* has proclaimed its aim is to redirect the focus back to Palestine, and the resistance against Israel, arguing that, the past years of Arab uprisings have led to confusion, lack of direction, and division within the Arab populations (Al-Hakim, 2012). *Al-Mayadeen*’s focus on Palestine is accompanied by a strong anti-imperialistic rhetoric, which *al-Jazeera*’s post-2011 editorial prioritisation had left vacant for others to house. *Al-Mayadeen* also stands in clear opposition to *al-Jazeera*, not least in regard to its obvious support for the al-Assad rule in Syria, the sceptical approach to Sunni Islamism, a noteworthy positive interest in Middle Eastern Christian and other religious minorities, and an unusual sympathy for Iran (Crone, 2017).

Al-Mayadeen is, moreover, manoeuvring within a sphere where Saudi Arabia aspires to consolidate its growing influence – as *al-Mayadeen* experienced in November 2015 when *ArabSat* decided to suspend its provision of satellite services to *al-Mayadeen*. This was done, following the accusation that, *al-Mayadeen* had violated the spirit of the Honour Charter of the Arab Media.⁶ The crisis was officially triggered by *al-Mayadeen*’s hosting of a guest who accused Saudi Arabia of being responsible for the casualties during Hajj [the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia] in 2015. The majority of the staff at *al-Mayadeen*, however, understood the root of the conflict as the station’s critical coverage of Saudi Arabia’s role in the war in Yemen (interviews, Beirut, November-December 2015). The incident reaffirmed *al-Mayadeen*’s self-perception of being the oppositional voice, fighting

⁶ By violating the charter, *ArabSat* suggested that, *al-Mayadeen* was guilty of broadcasting programmes which “contravene viewers’ rights and privacies, instigate sectarian conflicts, violence, differences, social disorder that disturb tranquillity, disunite viewers, or degrade and demean any of the political and religious figures in countries of the footprint of the satellite” (<https://www.arabsat.com/english/media-center/news-press-and-events/corporate/statement-of-broadcasting-via-arabsat-satellites> [accessed January 2020]).

against the dominance of pro-Western, Sunni-Islamist Saudi Arabia over the Arab media landscape.

The official details regarding the station's ownership and finances remain inaccessible. The management of *al-Mayadeen* has persistently stated that "Arab businessmen"⁷ fund the project, but there are several indications that Iran is the main – if not only – sponsor. The editorial line of the station is conspicuously aligned with the interests of Tehran, just as central persons around *al-Mayadeen* have professional or personal connections with either al-Manar, Hizbollah, or the Syrian regime (Crone, 2017). The physical location of the headquarters in Hizbollah-dominated Southern Beirut, furthermore underlines its political association; placed between the Iranian embassy, the Iranian cultural centre and other Iranian-funded media outlets such as Iran's English-speaking satellite station, *al-Alam*; Hizbollah's TV station, *al-Manar*; Hamas's TV station, *al-Aqsa*, and Palestinian *Islamic Jihad's* TV station. The role of Iran cannot be ignored, even though official data about the financial setup are lacking. This underscores *al-Mayadeen's* positioning in the Iranian-Saudi Arabian power struggle over regional influence.

The Iranian link may be an important element in understanding the station, and might be the main motivation of the funder; *al-Mayadeen* is equally an interesting arena for understanding political and cultural negotiations taking place in parts of the contemporary Arab public. The composition of broadcasts, the guests invited to programmes, the use of music and poetry, and so on, are all elements of *al-Mayadeen's* attempts to present a home-grown, Arab (Levant-based) alternative media platform to the mainstream, Gulf-centred, Arab media landscape. *Al-Mayadeen* becomes yet another actor that contributes to the process of Othering by articulating a division in a time of political power struggle and escalating violence between an 'us' and 'them' scenario, and not only on a regional level, but also globally.

A brief theoretical framework for threat narratives and enemy images follows, before I examine how these two concepts are at work at *al-Mayadeen*.

Threat narratives and enemy images – some theoretical perspectives

The study of enemy images was traditionally conducted within the context of the Cold War, mainly within social psychology and peace studies. According to Elizaveta Gaufman, the security context has changed today: "the theoretical framework of enemy images has effectively reached a dead end" (2017, p. 25). This field might, at first, seem less topical today; however, when one moves beyond the obvious frame established by the Cold War, it becomes clear that, constructions and propagation

⁷ See for example http://www.beirutreport.com/2013/08/who-owns-al-mayadeen_12.html [accessed December 2019] for an interview with *al-Mayadeen's* then head of news, Sami Kleib, about the funding of *al-Mayadeen*.

of threat narratives and enemy images are as acute as ever; while nation-states earlier constituted the primary actors for the discursive construction and dissemination of enemy images, today, this field has become pluralised.

Today, the flow of information – and along that images, narratives, and myths about others – is neither limited by national borders, nor fully controlled by national governments. A consequence of this contemporary media scene is a growing focus on mass as well as online media as less coherent actors or with a “disintegrated nature” (Vuorinen, 2012, p. 6). This new arena for discursive negotiations allows for media outlets, political movements, and civil society actors to propagate and engage with alternative narratives and images.

The construction of an enemy image often starts with a process of Othering. Othering or ‘Otherness’ is a discursive practise in which an in-group (‘us’) constructs a self-identity in opposition to an out-group (‘them’) as the Other. The binary opposition is reproduced through markers of sameness and differentiation, and is consequently constitutive identity constructions of relational oppositions (Hansen, 2006, p. 41). The construction of an out-group is thereby equally a construction of an in-group, as its identity takes shape while mirroring its own counter-image (Staszak, 2008, p. 2). The establishment of the Other is not, however, an enemy image per se, but an enemy is always understood as an Other. The main difference between an Other and an enemy is the element of a threat. If the Other constitutes a threat – perceived as real by the Self – it can develop into an enemy (Vuorinen, 2012, pp. 2–3). An enemy image cannot therefore merely build on feelings of dislike, but must involve the risk of violence (Luostarinen, 1989, pp. 125).

The enemy images can refer to an external threat as, for example, another nation-state or an internal threat as a group that is within society but outside the defining ‘us’ (the Self), (Gaufman, 2017, p. 5; see also Harle, 2000). This is regardless of the external or internal nature of a threat “to be effective an enemy-image must be easily recognizable, openly threatening, rationally, or at least pseudo-rationally justifiable, and emotionally touching” (Vuorinen, 2012, p. 5). A threat can therefore be understood as a discursive construction, the meaning of which needs to be accepted by a relevant audience in order to be perceived as a threat (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 30).

While discourses are constantly interacting and evolving, certain understandings can be relatively stable when reproduced within existing identity constructions. An effective enemy image builds on pre-existing threat narratives in order to resonate within a society (Gaufman, 2017, pp. 6, 27; Vuorinen, 2012, p. 5). The latter point makes Elizaveta Gaufman argue for the importance of integrating the notion of collective memory in the study of enemy images, as it is the shared information and memories held by a group (the ‘us’) that constitutes the precondition of the construction of an enemy image (Gaufman 2017). Bo Petersson even argues that, enemy images “develop from the ground prepared in the everyday by these less dramatic,

but nevertheless negative stereotypes” and adds that, the difference between the two is “in degree, not in kind” (Petersson, 2009, p. 461).

The construction of an enemy image therefore consists of several elements: it starts with a process of Othering, demands the existence of an actual or perceived threat, and often builds on well-established threat narratives within the collective memory of an ‘us’. These constructions are simultaneously (re)produced within – and among – media, and political and societal discourses, through references that can be performed both textually and visually. The meaning ascribed to a text or image is thereby understood as constituted within complex discursive structures that are (re)produced within – and by – the cultural, historical, and political context in which they are situated (Warrington & Windfeld, 2020, p. 40). An integrated part of enemy images is, moreover, the existence of a victim – the object of the threat (Gaufman, 2017, p. 22). Bahador argues on a constructional level that “enemy images are formed by the use of images, metaphors, frames, narratives, myths, and ideas” (2012, p. 196), while dehumanisation, demonisation, and presentation of the “enemy-Other as an indistinguishable mass” are central strategies (Steuter and Wills, 2009, p. 12).

Enemy images are thus understood as discursive constructs on several levels, including textual and visual references to a specific Other, as well as broader narratives that can (re)produce a collective memory. These discursive structures of meaning open cognitive realms of opportunities in which identities can be shaped and reshaped (Hansen, 2006, pp. 19–20). According to Lina Khatib, political actors in the Arab world are increasingly playing with narratives and image construction. She argues: “The Middle East has become a site of struggle over the construction of social and political reality through competing images. In this competition, one political actor’s carefully self-constructed image can be erased by a new, oppositional image” (Khatib, 2013, p. 2). Political struggles are thus (also) fought as battles of representation, which make the media sphere a platform for images, narratives, and so on to flow, interlink, and develop over time and space. This also means that, mass media constitutes both a central arena and a central actor for construction of threat narratives and enemy images.⁸

The following section is an investigation into the processes of Othering at *al-Mayadeen* during the station’s first years. One perspective of this process is closely interlinked with the contemporary political context in the Arab world, while another integrates the media scene and thus places *al-Mayadeen* within an ‘us and them’ division.

⁸ For instance, in regards to war reporting, Rune Ottosen argues that, demonisation is an essential element and thus enemy images can be “linked to the journalistic process itself” (Ottosen, 1995, p. 99).

The process of Othering – the construction of ‘Us and Them’

Born in the midst of political and ideological confrontations, playing out in the streets of Arab cities, and in the official political life as well as in the media, ideals of objective reporting were never part of *al-Mayadeen*'s DNA. From its first day of broadcasting, it was obvious that *al-Mayadeen* – like the rest of Arab media outlets – was taking part in a political power battle between ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’ or in the process of discursive Othering. Although the political frontlines were clear, there was little agreement, however, about who – or what – constituted ‘the good’ or ‘the bad’.

Al-Mayadeen, constructed the regional ‘bad’ as the ones who contributed to dividing the Arab world by supporting the Arab uprisings – whether siding with the democratically-minded activists or any of the (Sunni) Islamist movements. ‘The good’, on the other hand, were loyal to true Arab interests, symbolised by supporting the resistance against Israel. The Gaza war in 2014 proved an occasion to unfold this message. An example was the noticeable serial of promotional visuals of personal greetings to the people of Gaza from well-known Arab cultural figures.⁹ The initiative functioned as a public confirmation of Palestine as the centre of the collective Arab attention.

The Lebanese singer Moein Sherif, in his greeting to Gaza, participated in the deconstruction of the narrative of an Arab Spring. He sanctioned the premise that, any true ‘Spring’ should originate in Palestine: “The Arab Spring is not an Arab Spring if it does not emanate from the basic question, which is the question of Palestine and Jerusalem in particular”. Julia Boutrus, another Lebanese singer, backed the discrediting of the Arab uprisings, and confirmed Palestine as the main topic of importance: “They invented something called The Arab Spring in order to distract us from the original question, the central question of Palestine. The real Arab Spring today is in Gaza”.¹⁰ Who ‘they’ or ‘the Other’ is remains unarticulated. The interplay between textual and visual references certainly includes Israel, yet leaves the viewer with a feeling that ‘the Other’ is probably bigger than that, and thus tapping into references to wider discourses on the matter. Through such personal statements, *al-Mayadeen* slowly erased an image of the post-2011 Arab world as “a new worldliness” (Dabashi, 2012, p. 10), and reconstructed the former trope of Palestine as the axis around which true Arab interests revolve.

A hint about whom this extended Other included had already been communicated before the outbreak of the Gaza war. *Al-Mayadeen* was not only firmly positioned in a regional context but had been keen on adding a global outlook from the beginning. This had led to the close collaboration with the pan-Latin American news sta-

⁹ To mention a few: the Palestinian media person Abdel Bari Atwan, the Lebanese singer Julia Boutrus, the Palestinian-Egyptian poet Tamim Barghouti, and the Syrian actor Jamal Sulaiman.

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIN2_UOtvNI [accessed January 2020].

tion *TeleSUR* – but even before this was established, Latin America served as a region of ideological inspiration and like-minded media. As one central staff member at *al-Mayadeen* explained to me: “historically there are many similar conditions, especially with regards to the United States of America’s greed for the wealth of these Latin American countries and nations, and Israel’s greed for the nations in the Arab region” (interview, Beirut, November 2015). This idea about the two regions being united by a shared meeting with imperialistic hegemony – whether in the shape of Israel or the U.S. – forms the basis for the collaboration and for *al-Mayadeen*’s global outlook.

A delegation from *al-Mayadeen* travelled to Cuba in 2013, to take part in the annual Radio and Television festival in Havana. *Al-Mayadeen* covered the event, including Ghassan bin Jeddo’s speech to participants in which he articulated the ‘us-them’ division, and explained how he saw the contemporary global media scene divided into two opposing camps: one that supports Western imperialism and one that remains free, resisting the Western hegemony. He elaborated, addressing the participants:

You are with the public good and peace; they are with public misery and war. You are with media that serve the public good, the poor, the miserable, the intellectuals, the writers, children and women, and that defend the land, dignity, independence, and the love for cherished honourable life. They use and promote media that serve the public exploitation, corruption, the non-nationally-minded bourgeoisie, colonialism, slavery, and the humiliated and disgraced life under different titles that impose hegemony on everything and in the name of everything.

Bin Jeddo later changed to speaking in the first person, as he placed himself and his station within the ‘good’ camp. He said: “We are in fact with freedom, democracy, and human rights and we really want and seek and work in order to support the interaction between cultures and civilisations and history” (*al-Mayadeen* in Havana 2013, 29/07/2013). Who ‘us’ and ‘them’ actually represent again remains unarticulated, but the message of Othering is clear, and the contexts of an imperialist West is taking form. According to bin Jeddo, the world is divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad’; this is manifested historically, politically, and morally, just as it is reflected in the media landscape. *Al-Mayadeen* thus operates with a clear dichotomy that is globally applicable, and in which supporting Palestine (in any form or shape) functions as the crucial benchmark against which all political actors should be measured in the process of Othering.

An in-depth exploration of the empirical material follows, and identifies how this established Othering constitutes the basis for the relaunching of the old threat narrative of Israel.

Relaunching the pre-existing threat narrative of Israel

Relaunching Palestine at the top of the Arab agenda is equally a relaunching of the most well-established threat narrative in the Arab world, namely, that of Israel. Throughout the years Palestine – and Israel – has been a reason for wars, a central theme for all major regional political movements, a cause used by Arab states for self-promotion and self-legitimation and “the prism of pain through which most Arabs view the world” (Telhami, 2013, p. 73). The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has likewise played an important role in Arab media, not least after the birth of Arab satellite TV and particularly in *al-Jazeera*’s intensive on-the-ground coverage of the Second Intifada in 2000 (Elmasry et al., 2013). By 2011, for the first time in nearly 70 years, this seemed to be changing as other political, ideological, and military confrontations came into focus.

When *al-Mayadeen* relaunched the struggle for Palestine and, together with that, the threat narrative of Israel, it was with an integrated ambition about changing the perception of both the ‘good’ and ‘bad’. The focus on Palestine at *al-Mayadeen* is not only reflected in the time allocated to the topic; but also in the way, it is framed. There is a conscience ambition about breaking away from the mainstream perception of the Palestinian people as passive victims, and replacing this with a narrative of a proud and heroic people that actively resists with an admirable persistence. A central staff member from *al-Mayadeen*’s Promotional Department explained to me:

So, the image of the Palestinian human being [...] we are working very seriously on changing that stereotype of the Palestinian who is helpless and just crying. Because you can’t, psychologists tell us that you can’t empathise with a person like that. You can only feel empathy with a person that knows what he wants. It is like ‘tell me what you want and I will help you out, I can’t help you out if you are just sitting there crying all the time. [...] So, we do work on the bad stereotyped image of the Palestinians (interview, Beirut, November 2014).

The Gaza war in 2014 proved an important occasion for *al-Mayadeen* to promote such an alternative image of the Palestinians. The war was covered intensively, and while the results of the Israeli violence were far from downplayed, it was used to frame the heroic Palestinian resistance rather than their suffering. Arab cultural productions and figures likewise played a central role in the coverage, as a strategy to prove the continued existence of a heroic and civilised people. An example of this is the Lebanese singer, Julia Boutrus, who played a central role at *al-Mayadeen* in the crucial weeks of the war. She appeared in several contexts, and importantly, she released the song “Right Is My Weapon” [al-Ḥaqq Salāḥi], at *al-Mayadeen*. The song illustrates how the renewed heroic image of the Palestinians is accompanied by an equally weakened image of the Israelis. The song’s video footage showed Boutrus walking around in a beautiful nature setting while singing, is mixed with clips of courageous, professional resistance fighters, and rebellious civilians resisting the occupation on one hand, and cowardly, surrendering or wounded Israeli soldiers on

the other. As Boutrus notes in the song: “They [the Israelis] will leave and we will stay, and the land will remain ours”.

The heroic Palestinian image that *al-Mayadeen* wants to promote is not a new invention; rather, it builds on an old narrative that traces back to the first decades after the Nakba (the Catastrophe) in 1948. The image of the resisting Palestinian developed as part of the transnational, Third World anti-colonial community of resistance, and was radicalised after the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967 (Khalili, 2009, pp. 18–20; Matar and Harb, 2013). The international humanitarian and human rights discourse, which gained influence during the 1980s and ‘90s, however, challenged this image of heroic Palestinian resistance. The human rights discourse had already been invoked during the First Intifada (1987–1993) as a strategy for international attention, while the Oslo Accords (1993) and the following influx of foreign-funded NGOs changed the rules of the game (Hammami, 1995; Allen, 2009). Adapting to political circumstances, the image of the militant hero appeared to lose its appeal, while the innocent victim could win the sympathy of an international audience.

An important platform for propagating what Samir Kassir referred to as “the cult of victim” (Kassir, 2006, p. 81) was the media, and not least pan-Arab satellite TV, which, during the Second Intifada (2000–2005), turned the Palestinian into a “sympathy-deserving suffering human” (Allen, 2009, p. 162). Marc Lynch likewise shows how a discourse of shared Arab victimhood and societal crisis, promoted especially by *al-Jazeera*, was important for unifying the new Arab public (Lynch, 2006, pp. 11, 35, 58; see also Kassir, 2006, pp. 81, 85). At *al-Mayadeen*, this was seen as an expression of the hegemony of Western narratives within media. A staff member from the Promotional Department elaborated:

We think and we believe that it [the perception of the Palestinian person] was manipulated on purpose for years and years and decades, because it is more difficult for someone to feel [for] a weak person. As I told you, we believe that this was done systematically and on purpose by various media outlets. We believe that, it started in the Western media and it was copied – was it by choice or by practice or by being unaware of how dangerous this kind of practice is? (interview, Beirut, November 2014).

The threat (to Arab interests and Palestinian justice) is seen in this quotation as Western media manipulating the image of the Palestinian to weaken the Palestinian and Arab self-esteem, and depoliticise the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. *Al-Mayadeen*’s aim is to erase – to borrow the words from Lina Khatib: “one political actor’s carefully self-constructed image” and replace it with “a new, oppositional image”.

Israel, without comparison, constitutes the most well-established threat narrative in the Arab world, but *al-Mayadeen*’s stated agenda about revitalising the Palestinians as heroic and strong, emasculates Israel, and thus weakens the narrative of Israel as an intimidating threat. Furthermore, in *al-Mayadeen*’s first years, Israel was not the main threat to safety and everyday life in the Arab world. Armed conflicts in Syria

and Iraq were causing large numbers of refugees, as a new and more acute threat was taking shape, namely, militant Islamist movements, particularly the Islamic State.¹¹ Below, I further investigate how *al-Mayadeen* renewed and actualised the well-known threat narrative about Israel by including these new actors.

The construction of a two-faced enemy image

As outlined earlier, two effective elements for the construction of an enemy image are in accordance with Gaufman: the presence of a victim and of a (perceived) actual threat. The Palestinians no longer filled the part of the victim in *al-Mayadeen*'s heroic Palestinian discourse, just as Israel no longer played the role of the ultimate threat. The old threat narrative was transformed into a new enemy image, and was shaped at *al-Mayadeen* in an interplay between ideological beliefs, political agenda and developments on the ground. Although Israel continued to remain the well-established core, a new actor, the Islamic State, was integrated as another face of the same enemy. This is expressed by the Lebanese singer Julia Boutrus in her greeting to the people in Gaza in 2014: "And a word to the people of Iraq and Syria who are facing the same enemy, but with two different faces, the Zionist enemy of which the other face is extremism".

The two issues – the war in Gaza, and the conflict revolving around the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – might not seem related at first sight, but, at *al-Mayadeen* they were. While this inter-relation was only implied during the war in 2014 (as illustrated by Boutrus' statement), a year later, when *al-Mayadeen* marked the one-year occasion of the war, it had matured. In August 2015, *al-Mayadeen* presented a threat narrative under the slogan, The Same Confrontation, about Israeli soldiers and Islamic State fighters being one and the same enemy. This was constructed by images of soldiers divided into two halves – an Israeli and an Islamic State fighter, or by short visuals in which an Islamic State fighter was shot, but, by the time he fell to the ground, he had turned into a dead Israeli soldier. These images and visuals were broadcast in between programmes, on the homepage, and on the station's Facebook page.

One telling example of this campaign was the 45-second clip, *The same barbarism – the same terrorism – the same elimination*. It provided a historical perspective to the renewed threat narrative, and thoroughly interlinked Israel and the Islamic State. The screen is divided into two halves, with each one streaming similar images – one side showing the results of Israel's presence in the region, the other showing consequences of the Islamic State. There also appear similar streams of refugees and

¹¹ I fully acknowledge the extent of state violence, which took place simultaneously at that time. To this particular analysis, I focus on the threat narrative as produced at *al-Mayadeen* in which state violence in these two countries (Syria and Iraq) did not gain attention. On the contrary, the Syrian state was portrayed as combatting the threat rather than being a threat.

refugee camps, similar images of death and violence, and similar images of the destruction of cultural sites, olives trees, and religious symbols. Some images are old and in black and white, others contemporary and in colour. The clip draws heavily on Arab collective memories of Israeli violence in the region, as well as central symbols of Arab civilisation and cultural heritage, while the historical threat is interwoven with a new and contemporary one. To spell out the message of one enemy with two faces, the flash ends with a photograph of the Israeli President Netanyahu next to the then leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the words: The same elimination. The flash is visually powerful with strong images, strong slogans, and a strong message – about a new, yet well-known enemy.

The Ramadan programme of 2015, *Harrir Aqlak* [Free Your Mind], is another example of how the new enemy image was constructed. In this case, not by strong visuals but through persuasive argumentation in a context of religion – thus feeding into the sectarian media confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran (as mentioned earlier). The host of the 30 episodes presented during Ramadan, the Kuwaiti Islamic thinker Abdel Aziz al-Qattan sharply criticised the Gulf in general, and Sunni Islamism in particular. He did so with the legitimacy of being a khaliji [a person from the Gulf]. To highlight his Gulf identity (and thus authority), al-Qattan appeared in traditional Gulf clothing (interview, December 2015). In addition – I argue – his critical distance was staged by having all episodes shot outdoors in different beautiful Lebanese nature-settings.

Al-Qattan discussed general themes of religious or moral questions in the first episodes; by the ninth episode “The Zionists and Daesh”¹² (broadcast on 26/06/2015), however, things changed. Evening darkness and a bonfire had replaced the landscapes during daylight, and the rhetoric was sharpened. Al-Qattan articulated, in line with the visuals above, the interconnectedness between Israel and Islamic State, while the fire ate its way through the wood:

The Zionist entity came from the diaspora. It came to prove its descent from a land, which is not its land. Here is the problem: the practises of the Zionist entity. It displaced the Palestinian people; it destroyed houses, mosques, and churches; it erased the identity, any Arab identity; it erased every tree, it removed every beautiful tree, the Zionists removed every olive tree. [...] and this is the same practice, which Daesh practises today, or al-Qaida organisation and the *takfiri*¹³ groups, they are all the same. Names do not matter to me. Extremist groups whether Zionist or Islamist, their practises are the same as are their goals, namely to extend the Zionist entity. The goal is the dream of the Zionist entity ‘From the Nile to the Euphrates’ (Harrir Aqlak, 26/06/2015).

¹² Daesh is another term for Islamic State (IS) – an Arabic acronym for al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham and is used as an insult (Vultaggio, 2015, p. 1). I use this term when referring to al-Qattan’s viewpoints, as he consistently uses it.

¹³ Takfir means a Muslim who declares another Muslim to be apostate and therefore no longer a Muslim. Takfiri is the adjective and is used by some extremist groups to accuse other Muslims of apostasy.

Al-Qattan links Zionists and Islamists, their goals and strategies; they share an extremist agenda of destroying a people and a land. The focus is on the destruction of symbols of Arab culture and civilisation such as olive trees and religious monuments as illustrated in the clip, *The same barbarism – the same terrorism – the same elimination*. Thus, this is not merely about a territorial threat, but also a threat against Arab and Islamic identity. Al-Qattan adds: “Today, Daesh implements the Zionist agenda of erasing the Islamic heritage, the Islamic identity, and the Arab identity with all its minorities, ethnicities and religions” (Harrir Aqlak, 26/06/2015). Al-Qattan unfolds the enemy image later on in the same episode when arguing that: “Daesh is the same as al-Qaida, al-Qaida is the same as the Salafist Jihadist movement and the Salafist Jihadist movement is the same as Wahhabism”. Talking as a Gulf insider, he draws a direct line between the Islamic State and Saudi Arabia.

The editors initially doubted whether they should broadcast the episode, as they felt it was too strong an outburst that seemed out of context. The context arose on 23 June 2015, when the Islamic State released a video showing a group of prisoners in a cage being lowered into water and drowned.¹⁴ The episode was consequently broadcast as a direct response to an ongoing event. A decision that was confirmed when the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the bombing of a Shi’a mosque in Kuwait on 26 June (interview, Beirut, December 2015). This anecdote suggests how the construction of an enemy image is the interplay between existing political and ideological positions, and developments unfolding on the ground.

The escalating situation in Syria and Iraq not only provided a visible threat in the shape of the Islamic State, it also provided a new suitable victim, namely, the religious minorities. These religious minorities (as opposed to Sunni Muslims) played a central role¹⁵ since *al-Mayadeen*’s first day of broadcasting; but, as violence intensified, they came to play the new victim lead role. Part of the construction of this new threat narrative, and corresponding victim and enemy image, was the integration of religious pluralism into the Othering process. Religious tolerance thus became a fundamental characteristic of ‘us’, whereas ‘they’ were intolerant to a demonic degree.

By interlinking Israel and the Islamic State, *al-Mayadeen* constructed a new and more vigorous enemy image, built on a pre-existing threat narrative, and revitalised by a marching actual threat. This enemy image was, furthermore, broadened and globalised by the general insinuation at *al-Mayadeen* of regional and international collaborations – most importantly – Israel’s well-known alliance with the United States, and *al-Mayadeen*’s outspoken suggestions that, the Islamic State being a direct product of Saudi Arabian-promoted Sunni Islamism. Combined, this creates a

¹⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3135913/Sickening-new-ISIS-video-shows-caged-prisoners-lowered-swimming-pool-drowned-shot-RPG-blown-explosive-filled-necklaces.html> [accessed 16/05/20].

¹⁵ An example is the weekly programme *Ajras al-Mashreq* [The Bells of the Levant], which deals with Christians and Christianity in the Middle East both historically and contemporary.

two-headed enemy image (Israel and the Islamic State) with regional allies and global agenda; by adding the global perspective, *al-Mayadeen* elevated an Arab issue or an Arab enemy image to becoming yet another global phenomenon of Western imperialism.

Conclusion

Born at a time of crucial political developments in the Arab world, in a time where former well-established political structures were up for revision, *al-Mayadeen* offers an interesting case study for understanding the processes of Othering, threat narration, and enemy image construction. The Arab world likewise allows us to understand how these processes take place across national borders, and how transnational media outlets play a central role, not only as disseminators, but also as producers of these narratives.

Al-Mayadeen went on air in 2012 with a strong message about bringing Palestine back on top of the media agenda, while the rest of the Arab world directed its attention towards the political outcome of the uprisings. Imbedded in bringing back the collective Arab focus on Palestine, is discarding the idea about an Arab Spring that fundamentally changed the rules of the political game in the region. At *al-Mayadeen*, the Arab uprisings are considered yet an expression of Western imperialism, aimed at dividing and weakening the Arab world, and diverting the attention from the question of Palestine. This perception of the political context forms the background for an Othering process, where 'us' and 'them' are categorised on the basis of an acceptance or rejection of the notion of The Arab Spring.

The relaunch of Palestine as the centre of Arab politics is also a relaunch of the old and ultimate threat narrative in the Arab world, namely, that of Israel. However, as *al-Mayadeen* consciously aims at overwriting the mainstream victimised discourse of the Palestinians, and bringing back previous heroic narratives, Israel is correspondingly losing its vitality as an actual threat. Developments on the ground in Iraq and Syria, and the rise of the Islamic State, provided a new and more acute threat. The old and new threat narrative is interwoven by *al-Mayadeen*, thus constructing one coherent enemy image with two faces. The Palestinians have been de-victimised, while a new victim is taking form in the shape of religious minorities. *Al-Mayadeen's* promotion of religious tolerance becomes part of an Othering process in which Saudi Arabia plays the part as the ultimate 'they' or 'bad'.

The case of *al-Mayadeen* shows that, while the construction of enemy images starts with a process of Othering, and is based on pre-existing threat narratives within the collective memory of an 'us', it furthermore demands both the existence of an actual (or perceived) threat and an appropriate victim. The construction of an enemy image consequently takes place in a fine interplay between existing collective memories and ideological positions on the one hand, and current political developments on

the other – as illustrated by how the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq generated both the acute threat and the appropriate victim for an enemy image that fitted *al-Mayadeen*'s overall rejection of Sunni Islamism (and Saudi Arabian influence).

The pre-2011 transnational media were considered by many as the facilitator of a shared Arab public, allowing information flow and public conversations across national borders and political contexts. The post-2011 reality, on the other hand, has offered a fragmented media environment of politically-based echo chambers – an ideal context for threat narratives and enemy images to thrive. The establishment of *al-Mayadeen* and its following production of enemy images must be understood within this unfortunate trend of fragmentation. This is even more disturbing, as this critical time in the Arab world of continued military conflict and authoritarian consolidation, calls for a pluralistic media environment that offers genuine and constructive conversations about contemporary challenges and future aspirations.

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