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## The virus of the “others”? Corona and discursive othering in Arab media

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### Abstract

The spread of fear of the coronavirus and related insecurities around the pandemic have fueled nationalist and increased exclusionary tendencies in countries all over the world. In North America, for instance, anti-Asian racism increased when former U.S. president Donald Trump dubbed the virus the “Chinese virus.” A nationalist agenda has been strengthened in many places, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and hateful narratives blaming “others” for the pandemic, legitimizing a retreat to the protection of national borders and policies, are being spread in different media outlets. This article comparatively investigates processes of *othering* with regard to COVID-19 in four MENA countries – Egypt, Iraq, Oman, and Yemen – and asks: Who is held responsible for the coronavirus crisis in different countries? How is othering revealed in media coverage related to COVID-19? and What (in)sensitive language can be identified? The study looks at mass media coverage at the peak of the global lockdown during the spring of 2020. The media analysis reveals a strong emphasis on mostly national identities as articulated lines of demarcation in all four cases. A homogenizing and demonizing *othering* was detected in particular in the cases of Yemen and Egypt, but also Iraq, when blame was attributed to political adversaries. The Omani case was characterized by a more subtle *othering* that focused strongly on the importance of citizenship.

**Keywords:** othering, media coverage, nationalism, discourse, Arab, COVID-19

## Introduction

A pandemic is by its nature a transnational phenomenon. It does not stop at land borders drawn by humans. It affects humanity as a whole, not only a particular group. It could thus stimulate global solidarity and empathy. However, with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, we can observe completely different reactions: a discursive and real rebordering in an attempt to protect a nationally defined group and an attribution of guilt toward certain groups or countries. On an individual level, the aim to protect oneself can be explained with what psychologists call the “behavioral immune system,” which is “an unconscious psychological process that constantly scans environments for harmful pathogens” (Reny & Barreto 2020: 5). On a societal level, however, applying a discursive nationalism and blaming of specific groups can stimulate xenophobia, racism, and social fragmentation (Ahmed 2004). For example, in the U.S., former President Trump’s rhetoric on the “Chinese virus” or the seemingly funny pun “Kung Flu” has created an atmosphere in which anti-Chinese or anti-Asian attitudes grew in U.S. society (Reny & Barreto 2020). In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán linked the spread of the virus to migrants and refugees to reinforce the fear of immigration among the Hungarian population (Inotai 2020). In general, worldwide travel restrictions and the closing of borders were accompanied by a nationalist rhetoric characterized by the fear of and protection from the foreign “other” (Bieber 2020).

Mass media play an important role in constructing the “other” and reinforcing discourses of othering. There are two main reasons for this in the context of the coronavirus crisis. First, and because of the media’s typical focus on political elites, they help in circulating problematic political statements. Second, and particularly in times of crisis and alleged threats to the nation, according to Nossek (2004: 347–48), journalists function as “local gatekeepers” and are supposed to “handle any tensions between their journalistic values and the need to meet national ends by having a belief system such as patriotism.” Thus, a nationalist focus and discursive othering can be the result. However, Nossek also argued that the media or journalists’ “behavior is actually context dependent” (2004: 348). Turning our focus away from Europe and the U.S. to Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), we have to indeed acknowledge different political and media system contexts through which othering may take specific shapes.

COVID-19 has provided many regimes in the MENA region with a justification to restrict critical media and investigative reporting against the pretext of saving the public from false information spread by the media (Farmanfarmaian 2020: 855). At the same time, most media in the MENA region have never been as independent from regime influences as would be wished from a libertarian point of view. In fact, media have often been actively instrumentalized to reinforce the regimes’ official discourses. Even media that are not in the hands of the incumbents are often considered loyalist, a term coined by William Rugh (2004), hinting at the fact that media licenses are often given to businessmen close to the regime which then do not bite the hand that fed them. Thus, looking at the media discourse not only helps us to understand how journalists have dealt with the pandemic, but also allows us on a broader scale to learn more about political and societal discourse as it is reflected in the media. Since the focus on media discourse concerning the COVID-19 pandemic has been mainly on the Global North so far, we aim to fill the gap by looking at different MENA countries. Thus, this article comparatively investigates processes of “othering” with regard to COVID-19 in four MENA countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Oman, and Yemen, and asks: Who is held responsible for the coronavirus crisis in different countries? How is othering revealed in media coverage related to COVID-19? What (in)sensitive language can be identified?

In the following, we will first provide a theoretical framework by looking at what othering is and how it is constructed through the media. Second, we will provide some contextual information about the political and media systems in the four countries under investigation. Third, we explain our methodology of doing qualitative content analysis, and fourth, we will present the results country by country.

### **Theoretical framework: Othering in the media**

While the concept of othering is said to go back to the master-slave dialectic of German philosopher Hegel, it has taken a post-colonial turn through the writings of Gayatri Spivak (1985) and Edward Said in his book “Orientalism” (1995, first published in 1978). By analyzing the Western perception of the “East” or the “Orient,” they determined that a discursive construction of the other as inferior dominates both fictional and non-fictional writing, reinforcing a societal discourse of superiority in the Western hemisphere. While Spivak, Said, and other post-colonial scholars particularly focused on the ways colonial power relations are upheld through discourse, the concept of othering is not bound to a certain part of the world. It ultimately refers to the fact that power relations can be discursively constructed and reinforced. Jensen (2011: 65) argued that othering describes “discursive processes by which powerful groups, which may or may not make up a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups.” She also referred to Lister (2004: 101) who provided a more general definition of othering as a “process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’ . . . and through which social distance is established and maintained.”

The media are part and parcel of this process of differentiation and demarcation. Typically, media use stereotypes to reduce the complexity of the world in its coverage (Kleinstauber 1991). Stereotypes are used to attribute certain characteristics to groups or people, which ultimately creates an ingroup and an outgroup. The consequence of stereotyping is often the devaluation of the outgroup and therewith an overestimation of the ingroup. According to Lippman (2012), stereotypes are thus used to maintain a specific view of the world and form the basis of a specific moral system. Especially in the case of reporting on distant countries, regions, and societies, stereotypical representations in the media may have a strong impact on public opinion and may increase social stratification because personal experiences with the other are missing (Hafez 2002). The media’s impact on othering may also be stronger during times of perceived crises, in which media become an important source of information. One of the rare studies on public trust during the early time of the pandemic in the MENA region in the spring of 2020—a study done by Open Think Tank in Iraqi-Kurdistan—revealed that trust among people in mass media, in particular TV, is higher than trust in news spread through social media and even information from friends and family (Beaujouan et al. 2020: 10). While this finding may not be representative of the region as a whole, we can conclude that it is important to look at the media discourse to get an impression on what shapes public opinion regarding processes of othering.

Processes of othering in the media are often characterized by stereotypical dichotomic attributions such as own/alien, good/bad, or morally superior/inferior that ultimately create an ‘us vs. them logic’. A vocabulary of dehumanization and homogenization of the respective other is characteristic in this context (Said 1995). The bond of belonging that is discursively created in such a manner may refer to a variety of ingroups, such as a certain political group or a religious current or a class, race, or ethnicity. However, Bieber (2020: 3) detected over the past couple of years a global rise of “exclusionary nationalism.” He has defined nationalism as a “narrow ideology that values membership in a nation more than belonging to other groups” (Bieber 2020: 2). Othering is an essential part of nationalism, because the

formation of a national identity requires the demarcation of others through the self-attribution of certain values and a drawing of borders. During the pandemic, Bieber noticed that the “importance of citizenship” (2020: 8) has been reemphasized as well as the “primacy of the state” (2020: 8). Thus, the discursive line that is drawn between the self and the other in the context of nationalism may firstly result in a homogenized view of the own and the other nation, but secondly also draw a line between citizens and foreigners, privileging the former against the latter.

Othering can easily be instrumentalized to blame specific groups for phenomena that are threatening the status of the self. The other is seen as if they were jeopardizing a particular order of which the self is part. Castro Varela and Mecheril (2016) have spoken of the “demonization of the imagined other” as a typical consequence of this construction and detected racial, religious, or nationalistic discrimination in media, politics, and society as a possible result. Referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bieber pointed out that there is a “long-established pattern of linking minorities, racial groups, and specific communities to disease” (2020: 6). Given the rise of nationalism, the blaming and shaming of national outgroups has become common. Anti-Chinese and nationalist rhetoric has not only shaped the U.S. discourse, but also public opinion in the MENA region. A study on the level of public awareness conducted by scientists from Al-Ain University in the UAE, among respondents of six Arab countries in February and March 2020, revealed that the closing of borders was strongly supported. A huge majority (95.5%) of the respondents agreed on the survey item “Travel bans to/from areas of the disease should be implemented by the government to prevent COVID-19 spreading.” At that time, China was seen as the dangerous other: in the same study, 95.1% considered traveling to China a risk, and 47.2% even considered Chinese goods as a source of exposure to the virus (Bonyan et al. 2020: 6). Blaming a national other became mainstream, and has continued as such, underpinning Bieber’s observation that “exclusionary nationalists shift the agenda and change acceptable public discourse” (2020: 3).

In our own study, it has thus been important to look at the manifestations of othering in the media and to see which ingroups and outgroups are being constructed and if and how the latter are being blamed for spreading the virus. It is also of interest to identify what kind of language is used to create a logic of ‘us vs. them’ and to intentionally demonize the respective other.

### **Cases of investigation: Egypt, Iraq, Oman, and Yemen**

We examined four different country cases in the MENA region, aiming to include a variety of different forms of government, media control and affectedness by the pandemic. Even though all countries can be considered to have an authoritarian political system, they are not homogeneous and represent a wide spectrum of dealing discursively with such a crisis. In order to understand the specific results for each country, it was important to learn more about a) the general political approach of the country, which we assumed would shape decision-making processes and discourses during the pandemic; b) the degrees of freedom and (governmental) control in the media system; and c) the respective situation regarding COVID-19 cases and measures discussed and taken during the spring of 2020. In the following, we will review these three elements briefly for each case.

Since 2013, *Egypt* has been ruled by a military regime under formally elected president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Egypt has returned to hard authoritarian rule after an interrupted transition (Roll 2016). The regime is known for its heavy grip on the media, limiting oppositional and independent media to a minimum. Only in the press is there a bit of a variety of ownership models and opinions to be detected, while the broadcasting media is in the hands of loyalist businessmen or the secret service (Badr 2021).

The first coronavirus case was reported on February 14, 2020, in the Cairo airport in relation to a tourist from Asia. During March and early April, according to Joffé (2020: 518), the regime downplayed the crisis and even sent two planeloads of health supplies to the then strongly hit Italy. Even after many countries reported that tourists who had traveled to Egypt had been tested positive for the coronavirus, Egyptian officials continued to downplay the pandemic in Egypt, and only referred to foreign nationals and tourists as being infected. Only after two generals died of COVID-19 did the government start to act, and schools and universities as well as mosques were closed in April (Joffé 2020). In early April, not more than 2,000 cases in a country of 100 million inhabitants were officially reported—a peak would only be reached with more than 40,000 cases in June 2020 (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2020).

Since 2003, *Iraq* has been a federal republic in which elections play a significant role in the distribution of power. The country is characterized by strong confessional and ethnicity-based parties, with different Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish parties struggling for power (Wimmen 2014). The beginning of the coronavirus epidemic in Iraq coincided with a period of political instability after the resignation of the former government. The various parties were busy choosing candidates for the prime minister, and the media was busy covering this political struggle. The media system itself is characterized by strong political parallelism with most of the media aligned with one or the other political party (Khalifa 2021). However, there is a small number of media still in the hands of the government. Several media outlets are also in the hands of private entrepreneurs, thus making the Iraqi media system comparatively diverse.

In Iraq, COVID-19 was first detected on February 24, 2020, in Najaf, and it involved an Iranian student. The confirmed cases remained rather low, with 2,480 cases and 102 deaths reported by May 10 (Beaujouan et al. 2020: 3). But neighboring Iran at that time was in the spotlight for having the highest number of coronavirus-related deaths outside of China. The Iraqi government officially closed its borders to Iran by March 8. The central government imposed several measures, including partial or local lockdowns, after mid-March. This also affected the work of media—many newspapers have been appearing only irregularly since then. Nevertheless, the number of cases kept rising significantly. According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center (2020), the peak of coronavirus infections only hit Iraq in September 2020, with more than 120,000 new cases per month in a country of 40 million people.

*Oman* is a unitary absolute monarchy ruled by Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, who succeeded his cousin Qaboos, who had ruled Oman for almost 50 years, as of January of 2020. Through its petroleum and gas reserves, it has created wealth that is being carefully distributed among the citizens. Due to late modernization and a limited indigenous workforce, like many other Gulf countries, it heavily relies on guest workers from abroad. Around 42% of the population are expatriates, mainly coming from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Philippines (Oman News Agency 2020).

The media are considered part of the modernization plan of the country and are supposed to follow a conflict-avoiding political line, even though many media outlets are not directly owned by the government. The government considers it extremely important not to offend any of its international partners, mainly for economic reasons (Al-Kindi 2021).

Oman had its first COVID-19 cases reported on February 24, 2020, when two of its citizens returned from Iran. Starting in mid-April, the government imposed a number of local lockdowns. Already in March, cruise ships were not allowed to dock in Oman, and schools and universities went to online teaching. However, the number of infected kept steadily rising until reaching a peak in July 2020, with around 40,000 newly infected in a country of roughly



5 million inhabitants (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2020). It was reported that, in the early stages of the pandemic, the expat community was disproportionately affected by the virus, while the ratio changed later (Times of Oman, May 20, 2020).

*Yemen* has been embroiled in a devastating war since 2015. It started with violent conflicts between the Houthi movement that conquered the northern part of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a (Transfeld 2015). The internationally recognized government under President Abdrabboh Mansour Hadi finally fled to exile to Saudi Arabia. A Saudi-led coalition, including the UAE, has since launched airstrikes and sent troops to reconquer northern Yemen. Meanwhile, another anti-Houthi transitional council was installed in the southern city of Aden. Due to the war, in the spring of 2020, 24 million people required humanitarian assistance (International Crisis Group 2020: 4) of a population of 30 million. The de facto authorities in Sana'a and Aden banned international flights to prevent the spread of the virus, but this also affected the possibilities of receiving help from international human assistance organizations. Confirmed cases, however, were not more than 3,000 by the end of 2020, which is most likely related to a very low testing rate. On April 10, 2020, the first infection was reported in the south. In the Houthi-controlled north, no casualties were reported, and this was described by the Houthi-owned media as a "divine miracle" (Al-Thawrah, Sana'a version, April 5, 2020a), a blessing from God who "singled out Yemen for many of its worshipers around the globe for not spreading the Corona epidemic inside it" (Al-Thawrah, Sana'a version, May 18, 2020), until May 3, 2020 when a Somali migrant was found dead in one of the hotels in Sana'a.

The Yemeni media system has also suffered from the war, and the fragmentation of the country into different interest groups has led to extremely high political parallelism in the media. The two main conflict actors, the Houthis and the exiled government in Saudi Arabia, operate their own media, while other conflict actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood or the Southern Transitional Council in Aden also use media as instruments to disseminate their respective propaganda.

These four cases will allow us to gain insights into how, in the MENA region, different political preconditions and differing politics–media relations result in a variety of forms of othering mirrored in the media discourse.

## **Method**

In our study, we were interested in answering the following questions:

- Are "others" held responsible for the coronavirus crisis in the countries under study? Who are those "others"?
- Which forms and manifestations of "othering" can be detected in media discourse?
- What language and terminologies are being used that stimulate xenophobic and nationalistic feelings?

To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of newspapers (in print or their respective online versions) in the four different Arab countries described above. With regard to qualitative content analysis, we refer to Kuckartz (2016), who has suggested as a first step an in-depth reading of the material and an initial coding of relevant phrases that pertain to the research questions, which can be seen as abstract deductive categories. In a second step, these initial codes are reviewed, systematized, and summarized so as to find distinct patterns of argumentation that can be related to the three categories: (1) who is held responsible, (2) forms of othering, and (3) language used. At the same time, this method is not meant to employ rigid categories, but leaves room for the identification of specific arguments and statements that help to underpin the general findings.



The time period investigated covers the first two months during which COVID-19 first hit the respective countries and during which the virus could still be seen as an external threat. Thus, we opted in three cases for March and April 2020, while in the case of Yemen, we chose April and May 2020. In all media outlets we searched for articles with the search terms Corona and Covid-19. This added up to several hundred articles in each country case. From this initial sample, all articles were selected that were suitable for a qualitative content analysis with our focus, meaning that in particular longer news stories, opinion and analytical pieces were included.

For *Egypt*, 194 articles from three different types of newspapers were qualitatively analyzed: the state-owned Al-Ahram, Al-Wafd, the only remaining daily partisan newspaper, but which no longer has an oppositional political profile, and Al-Shorouk, a privately owned newspaper that can be considered the most autonomous from regime control in the Egyptian sample.

For *Iraq*, we examined Al-Sabah, which is the only state-owned newspaper in Iraq, Al-Bayna Al-Jadeeda, a party newspaper, and the privately owned Al-Mustaqbal Al-Iraqi newspaper. In the two months of investigation, in particular the two latter newspapers have only been published irregularly because of the lockdown, leading to fewer articles being published on the topic. The number of qualitatively analyzed articles added up to 120.

For *Oman*, the online editions of the three daily English-language newspapers, Times of Oman, Muscat Daily, and Oman Daily Observer, were analyzed. Stories that only reproduced articles from international news agencies were excluded. After examining a total of 183 daily editions only 30 articles qualified for a qualitative content analysis. The Oman Daily Observer is government-owned, while the Muscat Daily and Times of Oman are privately owned. In the Omani case, however, all newspapers can be considered loyal to the ruling incumbents, despite some diversity in ownership.

For *Yemen*, we included 161 articles in the qualitative analysis. The sample was selected from the online platforms of three strongly partisan newspapers representing the major oppositional players in Yemen. Al-Thawra (Sana'a version) is under the control of the Houthis, while Al-Thawra (Riyadh version) represents the internationally recognized but exiled government operating from Saudi Arabia. Al-Sahwa, published by the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah party, operates from Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, and is considered anti-Houthi.

In the following, we present the main findings and observations separately for each country. This includes (translated) statements from the analyzed material and an implicit answering of the questions. In the conclusion, we will answer the research questions in a comparative manner.

## Research results

### *Egypt: Denying one's own responsibility and blaming the others*

In the Egyptian case, the notion of 'the disease came over us from the others' dominated the media discourse throughout March 2020. Al-Ahram began its coverage of the coronavirus pandemic by simply denying a relation between Egypt and the discovery of any new infections. "There is no single case of Corona on the land of Egypt" (Al-Ahram, March 1, 2020) was one of the early headlines published. In its attempt to attribute responsibility to foreigners and tourists, it was seconded by the party newspaper Al-Wafd and the more independent Al-Shorouk. Al-Ahram was keen to publish this type of news in a special position on the front page of the newspaper, drawing attention to positive cases in relation to, for example, some foreigners coming from Canada or an Egyptian coming from France. A

Taiwanese tourist was accused of having spread the virus in Egypt through contact with a number of tourists and crew members on a Nile cruise to Luxor (Al-Wafd, March 7, 2020).

Consequently, the focus of the media discourse was on border control and travel restrictions to save Egypt from external threats. Al-Wafd dealt with the preparations in Egyptian ports, focusing on foreigners and goods coming from China, in particular (Al-Wafd, March 2, 2020). Al-Ahram took the same approach of blaming the opening of the borders and the continuation of air traffic as the main reasons for the spread of the coronavirus. It did so by referring to the positively evaluated decision of U.S. President Donald Trump to suspend travel to Europe and the decision of the Iraqi authorities to close the land ports with Iran after the outbreak of the epidemic there (Al-Ahram, March 13, 2020). Interestingly, the Egyptian media discourse therewith mirrored a political foe–friend discourse of seconding its perceived ally, the U.S., and blaming political enemies such as Iran and Qatar. After Qatar had closed its borders to anyone flying in from Egypt, Egypt prohibited entry for Qataris—and the media followed both decisions with a great deal of interest (Al-Ahram, March 5, 2020 and Al-Wafd, March 5, 2020). Moreover, Europe came into the focus of the media discourse. One of the analytical articles in Al-Ahram blamed some European countries for delaying taking full precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic, describing Europe as the “epicenter” of the outbreak of the epidemic (Al-Ahram, March 16, 2020). A columnist in Al-Wafd called on the Egyptian government to stop flights to Europe and halt air traffic in general (Al-Wafd, March 13, 2020). The less government-influenced Al-Shorouk also published a story on the Egyptian president’s orders to tighten control over any entry points to Egypt to stop spreading the virus (Al-Shorouk, March 2, 2020a). At the same time, it criticized how arbitrary the control mechanisms were and obviously only applied to specific nationalities: “Quarantine at Cairo Airport: there are no instructions to examine travelers to Kuwait” (Al-Shorouk, March 2, 2020b).

In addition to a strong focus on securing the national borders from infiltration, in parts of the coverage, a xenophobic discourse toward specific groups could be detected, reflecting anti-Asian and anti-refugee stereotypes. Al-Shorouk published a news report about migrants being considered a “time bomb about to explode” in Italy, as a result of the discovery of the first case of the virus in a reception center for migrants in Italy (Al-Shorouk, March 19, 2020). Most of the other xenophobic coverage, however, dealt with Asians in general and China in particular. One Al-Ahram writer used the term “the great Chinese virus” (Al-Ahram, March 10, 2020), while another writer repeated the phrase “Chinese virus” more than once. He also argued to “seek knowledge away from China,” which is a distortion of a prophetic Hadith that says, “seek knowledge even in China” (Al-Ahram, March 12, 2020). In another column, entitled “World War III,” a journalist mentioned that China could be seen as the biggest enemy in this alleged war that the world was now witnessing, describing the virus as the “Chinese dragon” that must be eliminated (Al-Ahram, March 25, 2020). Interestingly, one article strongly criticized the policies of some countries against China and also the xenophobic pictures used in German and Danish magazines to discredit China (Al-Ahram, March 26, 2020). But this remained a rare exception. In an Al-Wafd article, the writer exclaimed: “May God protect the brothers in the Gulf because of the presence of many Asian communities working and living there” (Al-Wafd, March 1, 2020), suggesting that everything that is Asian could be a source of the coronavirus epidemic. Another writer repeated this sentiment by referring to a China critical book which argued that China should be “fought” and “eliminated” because it was the main cause of the epidemic that now affected the whole world (Al-Wafd, March 28, 2020). Al-Wafd also published an article in which its writer explicitly accused China that the spread of the virus was not random but had political dimensions (Al-Wafd, April 6, 2020). Al-Shorouk’s coverage also used some of these xenophobic stereotypes (e.g., Al-Shorouk, March 3, 2020), but it also contained a media

critical piece in which it reflected on possible reasons for attacks on Chinese people in Egypt. It referred to a case in which a taxi driver bullied a potential customer because he considered him to be Chinese and concluded that anti-Asian racism was a product of the Egyptian media discourse (Al-Shorouk, March 2, 2020). In addition, Al-Shorouk (March 17, 2020), in particular, contained several pieces on China's successful dealing with the crisis, thus posing an ambivalent evaluation of "the Chinese other" between blaming and praising.

### ***Iraq: Being caught in the midst of a U.S.–China battle***

The Iraqi media coverage in the spring of 2020 took a different direction than the Egyptian one. Since, in neighboring Iran, the epidemic had already spread tremendously, the Iraqi government started to take measures early on. Most coverage therefore dealt with internal measures to confront the virus, such as curfews for many Iraqi governorates, preparing places for quarantine, and increasing the teams that sanitize governmental and private places. However, not all newspapers were able to publish during curfew restrictions in March and April. That is why the government-owned Al-Sabah newspaper was found to have published the highest number of articles that dealt with the epidemic. It continued to publish during the study period and can be said to convey the official Iraqi point of view.

In all three newspapers, the pandemic was described as a global threat, but the responsibility was not solely attributed to China. In fact, there was even a substantial number of articles in all three newspapers that highlighted Chinese cooperation and medical aid to Iraq. Al-Bayna Al-Jadeeda (March 16, 2020), for example, reported that the Chinese Red Cross "brings Iraqi citizens the materials to prevent and control the virus and the Chinese experience in fighting the epidemic in order to help the Iraqi government to combat COVID-19."

The Iraqi newspapers, whether government-, party- or privately-owned, located the reasons for the pandemic in a broader political conflict in which the U.S. was seen as the opponent of China (and also of neighboring Iran). Indeed, many articles mentioned that the virus was actually the result of a conflict between China and America, who were defined as the most powerful actors who were both capable of launching biological warfare, and the rest of the world seemed to be left to their mercy. The government-owned Al-Sabah published an edition in which two contradictory versions on the origin of the virus in the context of this biological warfare frame were explained: "Those who believe in the conspiracy theory say that it is a biological weapon and was manufactured in U.S. laboratories to strike China and Iran" (Al-Sabah, April 13, 2020a), while in another article it argued that "an American senator and others have also spread a theory claiming that the virus had originally emerged from a biological weapons laboratory in Wuhan" (Al-Sabah, April 13, 2020b). In general, many contradictory and unproved claims were circulated, and it was undecided who could be held more responsible—the U.S. or China. The privately-owned Al-Mustaqbal Al-Iraqi (March 12, 2020), for example, argued that Trump was behind the virus. Regarding China's accusation toward the U.S. of having smuggled the virus into Wuhan, Al-Bayna Al-Jadeeda (March 15, 2020) argued that "this is a very serious accusation," because it would be an accusation of "committing crimes against humanity, because the disaster has afflicted most of the world's peoples, their stock exchanges and financial markets, . . . and we are still at the beginning."

Al-Bayna Al-Jadeeda even carried a piece on March 11, 2020 that took up Iran's accusation of the U.S. being responsible for biological "terrorism." It quoted an Iranian official who said: "What we understood is that there are two types of coronavirus spread in the country, one of which is the Chinese Wuhan virus and the other is an unknown virus. The different virus did not have mercy on a 25-year-old nurse and killed her immediately. This virus is likely to be a kind of American bioterrorism that Washington has spread in the country." Moreover, it was also mentioned that the sanctions on Iran or, respectively, the isolation of China by the U.S.

are instrumentalized to the spread of the virus, emphasizing again the notion of biological warfare: “America’s goal is to isolate Iran and China from the world so that America remains in the forefront” (Al-Bayna Al-Jadeeda, March 2, 2020).

On the other hand, in several articles, China was identified as the source of the pandemic. Indeed, Al-Sabah (April 4, 2020) argued that “it is known that the source is the Chinese city of Wuhan, from which it spread with lightning speed to all parts of the planet, leaving an unprecedented state of panic among the poor and backward peoples who have no power to face any danger.” In some of its articles, Al-Sabah adopted the term “Chinese virus,” and in one case, also referred to “Corona being a socialist disease” (Al-Sabah, March 15, 2020). However, this was even presented positively because the author argued that “Corona embodied [China’s] socialism in making the world stand together to confront it,” while in previous catastrophes such as “famines that have killed millions of people in many places, especially in Africa, South Asia, Latin America,” the (capitalist) world stands by watching. Clear anti-Asian language could not be detected; on the contrary, some were even concerned with racist anti-Asian feelings in the U.S. due to the virus (e.g., Al-Mustaqbal Al-Iraqi, March 11, 2020).

### ***Oman: Emphasizing national cohesion***

In Oman, all the investigated newspapers sourced their news from the government and its agencies, such as the Supreme Committee mandated to oversee the control of the spread of the pandemic and the Ministry of Health, thus reflecting the official state discourse. There were no investigative stories on COVID-19 conducted by the journalists of the newspapers under review.

Unlike other international or Arab media, the newspapers in Oman did not publish any article in which the authorities blamed any country, nationality, or race for the spread of the coronavirus. The Omani media thus reflected the careful management of the country’s international relations and its main goal not to offend anyone.

Still, as in the Egyptian case, the closing of borders was a main issue reported in the media. One article reported that Saudi Arabia had banned its citizens from traveling to Oman, and Oman felt obliged to take its own measures and suspended flights to Europe, namely Italy, France, Germany, Turkey, and Spain and Iran, in mid-March (Oman Daily Observer, March 9, 2020). An article of the Oman Daily Observer (March 16, 2020) reported that a decision of the Supreme Committee was made to ban entry of non-Omanis into the Sultanate via land, air, or sea borders, with the exception of citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In this context of border control, othering was obvious in the constant distinction of Omani vs. non-Omani citizens in the official and the media discourse. People coming from other countries were specifically identified by their nationalities and countries of origin. What is even more important in Oman is that the population was also separated into two different groups. In terms of wording, Omanis were mainly referred to as “citizens,” while non-Omanis were called “residents” and “expatriates,” indicating a clear distinction—albeit without directly apportioning blame. Also, daily graphical updates in the newspapers on the development of cases in Oman distinguished clearly between Omanis and non-Omanis. The same sentiment of separating the to-be-protected “us” from the potentially threatening “them” was reflected in the Times of Oman (March 4, 2020) in the article entitled: “Experts from COVID-19 nations can’t return.” The article reported that expatriates of Chinese, Italian, Iranian, and South Korean nationalities who live in Oman would not be allowed to return to the Sultanate, should they travel overseas, even if their visas were valid.

What was even more telling were the efforts to highlight national cohesion in which, first and foremost, Omani citizens mattered the more than others. The Omani government took special



measures for the repatriation of Omanis who were stranded in Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., India, Pakistan, Thailand, and other places (Muscat Daily, April 14, 2020). This was accompanied by intensive coverage employing a patriotic tone in the three newspapers. Interviews with repatriated individuals were given large and prominent space in the media, highlighting the caretaking of the government for its citizens (e.g., Oman Daily Observer, March 24 and March 25, 2020). To also emphasize patriotism in the context of the pandemic, Omani doctors working in the UK, France, and Australia were interviewed on whether they would be ready to return if their country of origin needed their expertise in combating the pandemic. One of them was quoted as saying: “I am one of the frontline fighters against COVID-19. The situation in my country is currently under control. However, once my mother country needs me back to my duty, I will fly back immediately. If Oman needs me, I will fly back without thinking twice” (Muscat Daily, April 19, 2020).

### *Yemen: Constructing conspiracies of the enemy other*

In Yemen, the coronavirus pandemic has been clearly politicized by all parties—and so it was reflected in the media, being the mouthpieces of the parties which owned them. Each party used the pandemic to attack the other, claiming that the measures it took in the areas under its control were for the sake of the Yemeni people, while the respective other was attacked. In doing so, alleged and actual supporters of the other faction were included in the argumentation, creating a dichotomy of “us” vs. the cruel “enemy other.”

When the country was still considered to be free of COVID-19 in April 2020, but threatened by the first cases, the Houthi-affiliated media in Sana’a repeatedly described the pandemic as “a biological warfare” waged by a “coalition of aggression,” meaning the U.S., its CIA intelligence, and the Saudi regime, to deliver the pandemic to Yemen to achieve what they had not been able to achieve during the war which began in 2015 (e.g., Al-Thawra, Sana’a version, April 5, 2020). Many articles in Houthi-affiliated media considered the U.S. the main responsible actor, arguing that the coronavirus was the product of an “American industry” (Al-Thawra, Sana’a version, April 10, 2020). It was also claimed that “American Corona” (Al-Thawra, Sana’a version, April 22, 2020) is a virus that was created and developed by America to subjugate the world. It was also speculated that “there is an American tendency to spread the Corona epidemic and to exploit it even if it harms the American society itself” (Al-Thawra, Sana’a version, April 4, 2020). COVID-19 was seen as similar to what they did to “the American Indians when they introduced them to the smallpox virus through blankets, deceived them with so-called humanitarian aid, and killed and exterminated hundreds of thousands of them” (Al-Thawra, Sana’a version, April 2, 2020). It was thus concluded in the Houthi-media that the U.S. is the “enemy of the people” (Al-Thawra, Sana’a version, May 3, 2020) and it is “the one that causes humanity all this pain.”

A review of the Houthi-media discourse indicates that the coronavirus pandemic has provided an opportunity to vent the state of anger against the West, especially the U.S., and to generally attack what is considered to be the double standard of Western values, including the supremacy of white people. In this context, there was also talk about the “suspicious roles” of the UN and other international organizations operating in Yemen (Al-Thawra, Sana’a version, May 2, 2020). These actors were accused of utilizing the suffering of Yemenis to receive more funding, while only distributing the crumbs of that funding to the Yemenis.

Once the first casualty, a Somali migrant, was found in the Houthi-controlled area in Sana’a, the discourse changed from constructing an abstract American or Western conspiracy to more concrete accusations toward the direct conflict actors. Using a war-infused language, the Houthi-affiliated media accused Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as the “countries of aggression,” of purposefully and systematically planting the virus in Yemen through continuous air flights

that allegedly transported mercenaries infected with the virus (At-Thawra, Sana'a version, May 19, 2020). It was further argued that, in the southern ports of Yemen, thousands of illegal immigrants from the Horn of Africa, or even from Chad and Nigeria, were being let in without any medical inspections. It was also claimed that the Saudi regime had established camps for Africans on the Yemeni border to traffic them to Yemeni cities and governorates with the help of networks of smugglers who work with Saudi intelligence (At-Thawra, Sana'a version, April 11, 2020).

The media outlets of the internationally recognized government in Saudi exile, as well as Al-Sahwa, which is close to the Al-Islah party, took an anti-Houthi stance, but used the same kind of accusations, just turning them in the other direction. Since the Houthis are said to cooperate with Iran, their measures were discredited as mimicking the ineffective Iranian measures against the virus. According to Al-Thawra, the Riyadh version, the "Iranian mercenaries" (meaning the Houthis) had falsified the facts, disavowing responsibility, concealing the true numbers and statistics of the spread of the pandemic in their areas of control. Thus, according to Al-Sahwa, they duplicated the Iranian regime's way of managing the coronavirus crisis through political utilization of the global pandemic as well as concealing data and information from international organizations and local public opinion (Al-Sahwa, May 26, 2020). At the same time, this article argued that Houthi senior leaders were themselves infected with the virus, which they had brought back from their visits to Iran.

The references to Iran were clearly meant to emphasize what was being seen as a disastrous influence of a political actor that strongly opposes Saudi politics in the MENA region, which is the protecting power of the internationally recognized Yemeni government. Using this as a pretext, the alleged practices of the Houthis were illustrated in gruesome pictures. In a report it was speculated that the Houthis were killing patients in sanitary isolation hospitals, burying them, and strictly instructing their families to conceal their deaths (Al-Thawra, Riyadh version, May 17, 2020). Furthermore, it was said that the Houthis were "intentionally bringing people infected with the coronavirus to prisons" (Al-Thawra, Riyadh version, May 27, 2020) or sending security services to arrest those suspected of being infected with the coronavirus instead of sending medical teams (Al-Thawra, Riyadh version, May 17, 2020). Likewise, using the same tone, Al-Sahwa repeated several accusations toward the Houthis. In one of the articles, it was said that the Houthis were dealing with the coronavirus with a police mentality, as if it were a global conspiracy against Islam. The article argued that this was the same kind of denial that the Iranians were using (Al-Sahwa, May 2, 2020). Al-Sahwa also disgustingly described how, in a northern neighborhood, a local Houthi leader claimed that the coronavirus pandemic was "contrived and faked by Western countries" and "merely an international conspiracy aimed at preventing Muslims from congregational prayers and family kinship" (Al-Sahwa, May 7, 2020), while another article talked about rumors that, in hospitals, "Houthis will use lethal injections for people with the coronavirus to get rid of them directly" (Al-Sahwa, May 19, 2020).

## **Discussion**

In our study, we aimed to look at the manifestations of othering with regard to the construction of ingroups and outgroups, and if and how the latter are being blamed for spreading the virus. We also wanted to find out more about the language being used and how it reflected stereotypes and a vocabulary of dehumanization.

In all four country cases a clear demarcation of a national ingroup that needs to be saved from foreign threats could be detected. The media discourse thus reinforced a problematic nationalist perspective that helped attributing blame to certain outgroups and created the image of the nation and its (indigenous) people as victims of external threats. In doing so, the



media discourse of the analyzed outlets reflected the way the respective incumbents tried to regain legitimization for their actions (or inactivity) against the virus. At the same time, this reflection can also be seen as an instrumentalization of the media by the elites to blame their political adversaries through othering. As Nossek (2004) predicted for times of crises, media and journalists have been compliant and acted in a seemingly patriotic manner.

In the Egyptian case, for example, the regime for a long time neglected any responsibility for the spread of the virus and took counter-measures only half-heartedly. The media helped in justifying this by attributing blame to others. Othering included in particular China, which was depicted in a stereotypical way as aggressive and irresponsible, but also Qatar which the Egyptian regime had boycotted at the time of analysis and which was considered a political opponent. A homogenized view of the other including a dehumanizing language was characteristic for many media reports.

In the case of Yemen, the demarcation from the political other which was characterized as outright evil was even more pronounced compared to Egypt. The strongly instrumentalized Yemeni media on both sides of the fragmented political spectrum used a demonizing vocabulary to create a dehumanized other. It did not shy away from spreading lies and conspiracy theories in order to mark whole nations as either friend or foe, in which the foe was depicted as the threatening other. For the Houthi's media, the U.S., or more generally the West, was held responsible for the crisis as well as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, while for the exiled government's media Iran was to blame. Dichotomic attributions to the self and the other was characteristic in the whole media discourse.

In the Iraqi case, the political dependencies were also reflected in the media and led to othering processes. Yet, they did not seem to reflect a strong political instrumentalization as it was seen in the Yemeni and the Egyptian case. The media seemed to be somewhat undecided who to blame more strongly—the U.S. or China—for spreading the virus. Yet, the Iranian accusation against the U.S. of having used Corona as a weapon against its opponent China (and the Global South in general) was prevalent in Iraqi media. Interestingly and in contrast to the previously discussed cases, Iraqi media did not enforce a discourse on the Iraqi nation as being threatened by external forces. Instead, the media emphasized a more global perspective and asked about the immoral other in world politics.

In the Omani case, the media relied again strongly on the importance of national citizenship as a marker of an ingroup that needs to be protected, reinforcing a global trend as Bieber (2020) had predicted. However, the Omani media, which strongly reflects the official political discourse, did not use an aggressive language of blaming others, but a more subtle way by pointing to the greater amount of infections among the huge expat community and by making clear that national borders will be closed to many of them.

In response to our questions on the manifestations of othering in the media in some MENA countries we can detect an overarching tendency of othering on the basis of invoking mostly national identities as lines of demarcation. In those cases in which the identity of the nation state was jeopardized by internal fragmentation such as in Yemen or Iraq, sometimes Southern alliances were constructed and put in place against the West, in particular the U.S. Othering could also take more subtle forms when a cautious language was used like in the Omani case while the media in the remaining three country cases employed an outright aggressive and often demonizing vocabulary that was clearly meant to attribute blame to the other.

## Conclusion

By focusing on four different MENA countries with their specific political and media systems during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, we aimed to learn more about how discursive othering shapes media discourse. In all four countries, the discursive line of the political elites defined media coverage reflecting specific classificatory systems of difference during the pandemic.

In all four cases, the media played a questionable role by not taking a stand against political othering. On the contrary, the media emphasized discursive othering by attributing blame to others, often whole nations including their peoples, avoiding expressions of empathy, and abrogating responsibility. Instead of applying a perspective of joint responsibility and mutual care, the media seemed to remain an instrument of the political incumbents that are in desperate need of regaining legitimacy in times of crises. Attributing guilt to others is a long-established strategy in such moments, and the media in all of our analyzed cases has proven to be obedient to the needs of the incumbents, albeit with different degrees. In our analysis we have tried to make these degrees and different manifestations visible. One might argue that media in authoritarian settings are prone to instrumentalization. Yet, this does not release journalists and media producers from reflecting about stereotypical coverage that reinforces othering in a way that outgroups are demonized and the own (national) ingroup is portrayed as superior. Transnational mobility, social cohesion and international policy-making can be strongly effected by problematic images of the other and their incorporation in public opinion.

More research on how othering and (national) stereotyping is being carried out in Arab countries' media can help us to detect consistent patterns in media coverage and to develop strategies of how to challenge them through training of journalists and media literacy campaigns.

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