

Arab Media Reactions to U.S. Protests: How Regional Considerations Shape Media Coverage

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Jun 22, 2020

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Brief Analysis

A globalized world has meant that international media reactions to a policeman's brutal killing of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, and the subsequent protests have been swift and comprehensive. Responses within the Arab media have shifted between attempts to explain to readers sociological fault lines and structural racism in the United States and pointed takes on what these protests might mean for the upcoming election—with the underlying question of what it might mean for the region.

From a political perspective, images of protests are also shaped by the Arab governments' responses to the Arab spring, when pro-democracy protests were crushed in many Arab states. Notably, and in contrast to media responses, there has been a shortage of statements from government officials, with Palestinian officials being the exception. While this silence can in part be attributed to the fact that the current protests in the United States are purely a domestic issue, it is also important to note that numerous state-aligned media outlets have offered **characteristic viewpoints** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/arab-reactions-to-trumps-peace-plan-an-analysis-and-recommendation>) of their respective countries, suggesting an interest in indirect messaging on the protests without explicit comment.

Mapping American Politics

Much of Arab media has blamed hyperpartisanship for fueling the protests, but where the brunt of criticism is directed has largely been driven by extant governmental and organizational attitudes towards U.S. politics.

For instance, at least one country has viewed the protests through the lens of its own recent history of unrest and is responding accordingly. When Egypt faced **antigovernment protests last year** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Egypt-Economy-The-Next-Challenge-for-the-Regime>), Trump publicly backed Egyptian president Sisi, stating that “everybody has demonstrations.” In the past few days, the semiofficial and pro-regime newspapers seem to be trying to return the favor.

The semiofficial Egyptian newspaper *Ahram* (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1203/370382/Ahram-Weekly/World/About-the-US-protests-.aspx>) was quick to criticize Democrats who spoke out against Trump; other papers followed suit. The popular pro-regime newspaper *Yom7* accused the Democratic party, which supported the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring, of an attempt to oust Trump after realizing they could not win in November elections. Similarly, *As-sharq Al-Awsat* (<https://aawsat.com/home/article/2311561/%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A/%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%BA%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9>) maintained that Democratic politicians have exploited the incident to spread chaos and disorder. The newspaper claimed that anti-Trump media, while attacking Trump's “gradual” economic openness during the coronavirus shutdown is now encouraging the public to take to the streets. In this same vein, *Al-Watan* (<https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/4806581>) fiercely attacked Trump's Democratic opponent Joe Biden, comparing his response to “a third world country who is rushing to ride the popular angry wave to stir public sentiments to attain an electoral victory.”

In a somewhat dissenting view, prominent Egyptian journalist and analyst Amr Shobky wrote in the independent newspaper *Almasry Alyoum* (<https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1984212>) that the current protests in the United States revealed a profound crisis in the overall structure of the U.S. political system. Shobky pointed out that Trump attempted to exploit the violence to mobilize his constituency and attain the necessary resources to win in November, though he noted that Trump's strategy was poorly calculated and will cost him the upcoming election.

In contrast, Jordan's warm relationship with the United States did not translate into praise for the administration's response. While Jordanian newspapers did focus on Trump's response to the protests, the general conclusion was that it will likely backfire. The Jordanian newspaper *addustour* (<https://www.addustour.com/articles/1154629-%C2%AB%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B6%C2%BB?search=%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%B1/>) reported that Trump was silent on the issue while Democratic politicians, such as Elizabeth Warren, joined protesters in the streets.

From those with a cooler relationship towards the United States, criticism was more pointed. Member of the **Executive Committee of the PLO Tayseer Khaled** (<https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2020/06/01/1341266.html>) suggested that Trump was unlikely to be reelected, citing the President's inability to address the economic consequences of COVID-19 along with reckless and violent speech directed at the protestors. The English language *Daily Star* (<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2020/Jun-04/506949-another-long-hot-summer-in-america.ashx>), based in Beirut, also expressed doubts about a Trump victory in November due to his current handling of the situation.

The Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-qabas* (<https://alqabas.com/article/5778082-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A8-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%83-%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%B3%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%AB%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%87>) specifically mentioned Trump's photo-op at the historic St. John's Episcopal Church, calling the event a poor attempt to bolster his numbers and benefit his 2020 reelection campaign. The Qatari *Al-Jazeera* (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/trump-almighty-miracle-200609140352324.html>) also discussed the visit, stating that as Trump loses more support from Christians and fellow Republicans, his chances of winning in November become increasingly slim.

In Iraq, media offered a slightly different prediction for the 2020 U.S. presidential election, focusing on the divide itself. The “official newspaper of Iraq,” *Alsabaah* (<https://alsabaah.iq/26260/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%8A>), discussed racism in the United States, but criticized both Democrats and Republicans for what the paper described as both sides using the protests as a way to boost their campaigns and standing on social media. The Iraqi news outlet also suggested that Trump will likely distract people with images of looting and burning buildings to get white voters to continue to support him, drawing comparisons to the 2016 elections when Trump changed the expectations just days before.

Most extreme, the pro-Hezbollah and pro-Syrian regime newspaper *Almayadeen* (<https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/blog/1402087/%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9>) maintained that Trump’s threat to use the army and shoot demonstrators has exposed the true face of America. The paper also cited Trump’s decision to withhold funding from The World Health Organization (WHO) as exposing the ugliest form of racism, as defunding will paralyze operations in poorer countries, especially in Africa and South America. The newspaper further claimed Trump’s move was meant to “scapegoat” the left and mobilize right wing supporters.

Critiquing American Democracy and Culture

Aside from specific political predictions, some Arab media has also used the protests to bring U.S. democracy and culture, which the United States has tried to promote in the Middle East, under fire. In its recent statement on the events, the International Union of Muslim Scholars called the Statue of Liberty an example of “American hypocrisy.” Similarly, journalist Ahmed Moussa accused the United States of hypocrisy on *Sada al Balad TV*, declaring the United States to be “the worst country in the world when it comes to human rights.” An opinion article in the English daily newspaper, *Jordan Times*, (<https://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/gwynne-dyer/race-america>) made a similar claim: “Either way, race relations in the United States are still worse than almost anywhere else.”

Algerian media criticized Trump’s response to the crisis, stating that the U.S. President refused to take proper measures. The French language newspaper in Algeria, *Libetre* (<https://www.liberte-algerie.com/actualite/le-cauchemar-americain-339598>), criticized Trump’s decision to deploy U.S. forces to restore order, calling the act “ironic” and arguing that it would tarnish the image of the United States as a world power. *Morocco World News*, headquartered in Rabat and Washington, D.C., referred to the United States as a “selective Democracy” in its write-up of the situation. Similar to the Algerian media response, *Morocco World News* (<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2020/06/304592/is-the-united-states-living-its-african-american-spring/>) claimed that the protests tarnished the image of U.S. democracy, revealing that the United States is not as powerful as its politicians claim it to be.

The spokesperson for Hamas, Fawzi Barhoum (<https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2020/06/01/1341272.html>), linked the killing to events closer to home; he states that the recent killing of a young Palestinian man, Iyad Al-Hallaq, by an Israeli soldier mirrored scene in the United States, as both instances reflect a culture of racism in which security apparatuses have been constructed. The Palestinian newspaper *Al-Quds* (<https://www.alquds.co.uk/%d8%ab%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d9%85%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%83%d9%8a%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%81%d8%ac%d8%a7%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%a7%d9%82%d8%b6%d8%a7%d8%aa>) also attacked the U.S. culture, describing how the recent murder of George Floyd peeled back the layers to reveal “contradictions inherent in American culture” and how the anger seen on the streets is a manifestation of “cumulative disappointment among the marginalized Americans.”

Despite Egyptian newspapers’ praise for the administration, their comments on American society were more critical. The Egyptian newspaper, *AlmostakbilO*, also described the frustration on display in the streets as simmering beneath the surface, accusing successive U.S. administrations of using “flowery words” about equality and justice, which were only partially true. The Lebanese center-left newspaper *Al Nahar* (<https://en.annahar.com/article/1200908-us-adversaries-highlight-unrest-to-undercut-criticism>) also highlighted numerous instances of racial injustice in America, stating that the U.S. judicial system has failed to “keep up.” The Emirati publication *Al-Bayan* (https://www.albayan.ae/one-world/overseas/2020-06-04-13875549?itm_source=parsely-api) similarly cited other instances of police brutality and noted that the killing of George Floyd was not an isolated incident.

Linking Protest to Conspiracy

Yet some commentators did not see the protests as a domestic issue at all; several Arab media outlets accused regional actors of fueling tensions to further their interests and discredit their rivals in the region. In his talk show, Egyptian pro-regime journalist Nashat Al-Daihi accused the Muslim Brotherhood’s media of catalyzing the U.S. protests by joining in with “so-called” fake banners. The Egyptian pro-regime newspaper, *Al-Ahram* (<http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2413037.aspx>), also accused the Muslim Brotherhood of influencing the protests in the United States, referring to the demonstrations as a “revolution.”

Alternatively, some Arab media (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7u8ucl>) accused Iran, Turkey, and Qatar of playing a role in inciting chaos with the goal of dethroning Trump in November. Hezbollah was also accused of inciting violence; Saudi political analyst Fahd Dibaji tweeted that Hezbollah (<https://twitter.com/search?q=%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B7%20%D8%AE%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A1%20%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8%20%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A1%20%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8%20%D8%A7%D9%82>) was responsible for the looting and riots through an undercover operation.

Many Arab media outlets, known for criticizing international and local Non-Governmental Organizations during the Arab spring, have also somewhat hypocritically criticized NGOs for their silence on the protests. *Hala Abu Al-Saad* (<https://www.dostor.org/3103929>), a member of the Egyptian House of Representatives, maintained that while Human Rights Watch (HRW) disseminates false information about the human rights situation in Egypt, it has remained silent on the current violations in the United States. She added that this silence implies that HRW’s reports are biased and non-transparent. Alternatively, the Bahrain newspaper *Akhbar-Alkhalaj* maintained that the silence from U.S. NGOs implies that the U.S. administration’s statements about the protests are credible.

These sampling of responses reflect how regional views on the United States come into play in the reporting of a major domestic U.S. issue. While there is no shortage of opinion on the ongoing events, the focus in many ways remains on the U.S. strategic, diplomatic, and economic [interests in the region](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-consequential-strategy-the-america-first-approach-has-distinct-advantages) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-consequential-strategy-the-america-first-approach-has-distinct-advantages>) before the November election. ❖

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