

The Russian Propaganda in Arabic Hidden from the West

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Brief Analysis

Russian narratives are increasingly suffusing Arabic social media depictions of the war in Ukraine.

As a native Arabic speaker and intellectual historian who has spent years researching pro-democracy digital activism, I am alarmed by what I am seeing online today. Since 2016, we have all been made aware of Russian disinformation targeted at English speakers. However, most Westerners do not realize that there is an equally—if not more dangerous—Arabic-language propaganda campaign currently working to warp public perceptions of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Authoritarian regimes, including Russia, are using social media to portray the unprovoked Russian war on Ukraine as a David against Goliath struggle—with, incredibly, the *Western* powers as Goliath against the David of Russia. This grotesque distortion is part of a wider anti-democratic propaganda war that authoritarian regimes are waging around the world. And when it comes to the narratives adopted in the Arabic social media space, we in the West are losing.

On Twitter, for example, merely typing “Ukraine” in Arabic (اوكرانيا) yields a slew of overwhelmingly pro-Russian messaging. When writing this article, for instance, I came across a tweet of a video of a hospital bombing—the type of act Russia recently committed in Mariupol with devastating consequences for civilians. This tweet, however, directs the reader to a video of Mosul in 2016, when the United States (at the request of the Iraqi military) targeted a hospital being used as an ISIS operations center in the battle to retake Mosul from ISIS control. According to the tweet though, the context is somewhat different. It reads: “the so-called humanity of Obama in Iraq as he bombed a hospital in Mosul with internationally banned chemical weapons. This is how the children of Mosul were buried.”

Another tweet from a social-media influencer contrasts the Western response to the Ukraine crisis with its response to Palestine, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. A former Saudi official, for his part, tweeted that he is hopeful that “the Ukrainian war could be the beginning of the end of the American hegemony and the formation of a multi-polar world, which would be for the benefit of many of the world’s population.” This tweet presumes that a world in

which Russia's brutal dictatorship is further empowered would serve humanity—entirely ignoring the suffering of the Ukrainian people that the very same Russian power has inflicted.

Even outside of the blatant lies from sources like the Arabic version of *Russia Today*, the Russian narrative is clearly seeping into Arab accounts of the conflict, and the above examples cannot be considered outliers. I have been monitoring these tweets for the past several days, usually looking at the top hundred tweets or so. With rare exceptions, the dominant narrative deflects sympathy away from Ukraine to focus on the supposed evils of Western liberal democracies, and often defers to the Russian narrative about the war. Though it is effectively impossible to determine the actual origin of these accounts, many of the tweets appear to come from Gulf trolls. Many have Saudi or Emirati flags in their profile pictures, while others bear profiles depicting someone wearing Gulf Arab attire.

Again, it is not clear whether these accounts are legitimately from the Gulf or if they are planted to give the impression of Gulf support for the Russian cause. Still, it would not be surprising if they were authentic as they are not so far off from the official attitudes of these governments. This connection may surprise many Western observers; after all, why should an Emirati take the side of Russia in what is so manifestly an unjust, unprovoked war against a neighboring state?

Yet the Gulf states have a long history of supporting authoritarian regimes in the region and beyond. Most recently, they backed President Sisi of Egypt, General Burhan of Sudan and President Saied of Tunisia. At present, the U.S.-Gulf ties appear to be at a historic low, as detailed by [this \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/03/30/ukraine-gulf-saudi-uae-biden/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/03/30/ukraine-gulf-saudi-uae-biden/) Washington Post article. Along with China and Russia, the Gulf states are among the most advanced globally in their digital authoritarianism. Among other techniques they have perfected is their use of troll farms to overwhelm and discredit authentic narratives. One infamous troll farm is connected directly to Saud Al-Qahtani, one of the senior advisors of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Qahtani allegedly oversaw the harassment of Saudi dissidents and the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

I have also watched with alarm the consistent and growing crescendo of anti-Western, anti-democratic discourse in the online Arabic-speaking world over the past decade. Many of the region's regimes have used the internet to intensify their onslaught on pro-democracy and human rights activists. [This study \(https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/POMEPS_Studies_43_Web.pdf\)](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/POMEPS_Studies_43_Web.pdf) from leading social scientists from Stanford and George Washington Universities, for example, details the “digital surveillance, repression and control” authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have deployed against their own people.

Amid this barrage of anti-Western propaganda favoring Russia, the silence of pro-Western voices is deafening. While many are maligning what they perceive to be double standards between European attitudes towards Ukrainian and Middle Eastern refugees, no one asks what prevented wealthy Gulf Arab countries from taking in Syrian refugees with a level of generosity that approaches what Ukraine's neighbors have shown. The Germans and other European nations were in fact much more hospitable to the Syrian refugees than any of the rich Arab states, which essentially closed their borders to them.

Nor is there any mention of the significant role that wealthy Arab countries played in instigating or perpetuating the conflicts in Yemen, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the region—even as, of course, we in the West must ask ourselves the difficult questions of our responses to those conflicts as well. At the most basic level, there are simply not enough voices correcting the factual errors and, one presumes, deliberate lies being spread online about the West's and Russia's respective roles in Ukraine. These voices fit neatly into Russia's deliberate misinformation campaign, with the West losing the war of ideas online.

Some might think that the most we can do for Ukraine—and the defense of liberal democracy—is limited to sanctions and supplying weapons. But as both a scholar and a native of the Middle East, I am convinced that Western

governments cannot afford to ignore Arabic coverage of the Russian war on Ukraine and its widespread anti-democratic messaging more broadly.

Most urgently, doing so could lead to thousands of militants joining the Russian war to fight “the West” in Ukraine. Similar narratives inspired tens of thousands of young Muslims around the world to migrate to Iraq and Syria to wage a war that was similarly packaged as a battle against Western influence. Putin is already seeking to recruit Syrian mercenaries for his war. If liberal democracies continue to ignore the information war being waged by authoritarian states around the world, a Syria or Libya scenario may develop in the heart of Europe.

Beyond these immediate threats, promoting liberal values online is a matter of profound political concern. Authoritarian regimes clearly understand the consequences of exposure to liberal democratic norms; this is why they ensure that populations around the world, including in the Middle East, see only the most sinister side of the West online and in television images. Western liberal democracies are far from perfect, but they are certainly more advanced in human rights than the regimes who seek to undermine them. For those who doubted this fact, the long days since February 24 should provide sufficient evidence. Strengthening the belief in liberal democratic norms and universal human rights has become an existential need, not just for us domestically, but also for the rest of the world.

Today, young Arabic speakers are flooded with anti-democratic messages around the clock. They are inescapable, particularly on social media. Those who attempt to educate their peers on civic engagement on social media face formidable challenges, as I have [written about \(https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/supporting-youth-activists-mena-region-challenging-reality-and-opportunities-brighter\)](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/supporting-youth-activists-mena-region-challenging-reality-and-opportunities-brighter). As an Arab American, I long for those on the receiving end of this propaganda to enjoy the freedoms I do in a liberal democracy. Until then, Russia is dominating the narrative. The question we must ask ourselves is, what is the truth worth to us? ❖

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