Is the West Losing the Battle of Narratives in the Middle East?

by Anna Borschevskaya (experts/anna-borschevskaya), Catherine Cleveland (experts/catherine-cleveland)

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Instead of leaving misinformation and whataboutism largely unchallenged, Washington and its allies need to express their perspective towards the West more effectively by highlighting Russian and Chinese hypocrisy.

Amid Western outrage at Russian President Vladimir Putin's war, Middle Eastern views of the conflict are colored by attitudes toward the West itself. Arab narratives are typically ambivalent in their presentation of Western reactions. They include accusations of American hypocrisy and double standards.

Political cartoons offer unique insights into these perceptions. They also help show how the Middle East perceives itself within broader international conflict.

Since the war in Ukraine began, Arab-language cartoons have offered divergent viewpoints on Russia’s actions. These range from neutral calls for negotiations to open condemnations of Russian atrocities.

Despite the variety of views, however, a dominant theme has emerged in the Middle East—one that sees a profound imbalance between the West’s response to Ukraine and its reaction to other conflicts. Arab cartoonists’ depictions of Western hypocrisy take center and front in many presentations of the war. These comparisons reveal a serious misunderstanding of what is driving Western outrage and the deep, direct impact the war in Ukraine is having on the West.

Hypocrisy Is the Theme

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A Descent Into Whataboutism

These comparisons reveal a serious misunderstanding of what is driving Western outrage and the deep, direct impact the war in Ukraine is having on the West. For one, the war in Ukraine is right at the European Union’s doorstep—Poland alone already hosts more than two and a half million (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/poland-ukraine-refugee-crisis-russia-vladimir-putin-conflict-roza21967) Ukrainian refugees. Western outrage also stems from Putin’s intent to restructure Europe’s security architecture. Fears of possible Russian escalation into a war with NATO, and of the possible use of nuclear weapons, are uniquely haunting factors that Western policymakers must navigate when they look at the war in
This context helps explain why the war in Ukraine hits a deeper nerve than other conflicts. However, a number of journalists in Western media (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/02/civilised-european-look-like-us-racist-coverage-ukraine) have contrasted Ukraine with the Middle East using language that implies the suffering of Ukrainians is somehow worse. These attitudes have been duly rebuked. Numerous think-pieces have attempted to explain and understand this reporting gap, in publications such as NPR (https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandnews/2023/03/04/1084203595/not-every-war-gets-the-same-coverage-as-russian-invasion-and-that-has-consequence), Al-Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-listening-post/2022/3/19/the-war-in-ukraine-according-to-the-us-media), and others. But the soundsbites exist nevertheless, and they chip away at Western credibility. According to Google trends (https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&query=Ukraine+Syria), the attention Americans have given to the war in Ukraine easily outpaces the attention placed on Syria from 2011 onward. Yet Russia’s Syria is no less destructive than its actions in Ukraine. In this sense, Arab cartoonists have a point.

But cartoonists’ accusations of hypocrisy sometimes descend into whataboutism. Carlos Latuff is a case in point. The Brazilian cartoonist, popular on Arabic social media, has dedicated much of his career to championing the rights of Palestinians and Palestinian statehood. Like others, Latuff has created a number of cartoons calling out hypocrisy by comparing Ukraine and Palestine.

However, Latuff has also tweeted (https://twitter.com/LatuffCartoons/status/1511358059590914061?s=20&t=tlkwt8xyiViLLgVOlOmqig) views such as, “The war in Ukraine is probably the one only in which only one side’s version is taken into account. Ukrainian Nazi militias are heroes, and Russian troops are villains. Pure Western propaganda.” The outlet that regularly publishes his work, Mintpressnews, is also known for characterizing the chemical attack on Ghouta by Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad as a false-flag operation. Here, Latuff’s apparent predisposition for Russian narratives warps reality. In fact, neither the West nor the Ukrainian government extols the very small neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine.

In other words, Arabic media is likely to depict the war in Ukraine as a reflection of a broader, cynical struggle for control between great powers. This is a long way from the West’s impression of the war, wherein a free and peaceful nation defends itself against a bigger aggressor. Understanding and addressing this perspective is important, especially since other state actors (https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2022/04/16/604048/Pope-Francis-racism-Ukraine-immigrants) are happy to bolster these narratives in order to erode Western credibility. A lengthy Twitter thread (https://twitter.com/CaoYi_MFA/status/1510687627619491858) from Cao Yi, a Chinese diplomat in Lebanon, is instructive. Along with memes comparing Ukrainians and Palestinians and critiquing U.S. interventionism, the diplomat tries to discredit all sorts of Western stances, from its accusations against Russia to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s support for protests in Hong Kong. In these cases, similar headlines belie the very different contexts of the cases they compare. There is no moral comparison between the bombing of Serbia, which followed its horrific attacks on Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Russia’s bombing of Kyiv.

And herein lies the lesson for the West. Moscow and Beijing can incorporate prevalent narratives from the Middle East into their own worldviews. The West cannot afford to leave these narratives unchallenged, but it has yet to effectively express its own perspective. The West needs to highlight its rivals’ own hypocrisy to Arab audiences.

Anna Borsch-Bock is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute’s Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. Catherine Cleveland is the Institute’s Wagner Family Fellow and managing editor of Fikra Forum. This article was originally published on the 19FortyFive website (https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/05/middle-east-narratives-ukraine-hypocrisy/).
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