



**SOAS**  
University of London

# Media, COVID 19 and the Arab World

Dina Matar, Centre for Global Media  
and Communication

**SIS Insight series**  
Briefing 1  
15 May 2020



Two inter-related phenomena have characterized the mediation of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Middle East – the first is the prevalence of conspiracy theories related to the virus (this is what the World Health Organization called a global infodemic) in both digital and public spheres, and the second is the instrumentalization of these narratives in political and media discourse to legitimize state practices, define public discourse and impose stricter controls on freedom of expression. While the region must not be seen as an exception – indeed, mediated conspiracies related to Covid-19 have been particularly rife in the West world with the most notorious disseminated by none other than US President Donald Trump – it remains important for scholars to critically engage with the risks such discourses bring to marginalized communities

## ***Conspiracy discourses have always been there but they become more prominent during moments of crisis***

such as refugees displaced by ongoing conflicts, oppressed groups, political opponents, systematically excluded from taking part in the production of knowledge .

In reality, it is difficult to clearly demarcate conspiracy discourses from disinformation and fake news (or, in the Covid-19 age, infodemic), terms that have entered the contemporary lexicon as some new phenomena we all need to be wary of. But history tells us that such discourses have always been there, and that they become more prominent during moments of crisis when the legitimacy of political power is tested. It is also difficult to de-link conspiracy discourses around Covid-19 from the actual socio-political contexts within which these emerge - prolonged conflict, discrimination, displacement and occupation. Indeed, can we take claims circulated in the Emirati and Saudi twitter spheres under the hashtag in Arabic "Qatar is corona"<sup>2</sup> that Qatar manufactured the virus in China in order to jeopardize Saudi Vision 2030 and Dubai Expo 2020, or other claims that blame the spread of the virus on "Shia backwardness" for granted without referring to inter-state and intra-state relations and discursive practices. Or can we address how political elites use the moment of crisis to legitimize practices and enforce discrimination, such as in Israel, which has used the pandemic to further exclude Palestinians from the public sphere.

How can we talk about the extreme measures in Egypt and Jordan without thinking of their effect on freedom of expression? And on journalism? In Egypt, the government revoked press credentials of journalists for citing epidemiologists who estimated more than 19,000 COVID-19 infections in the country and in Jordan. In Jordan, which has imposed some of the strictest controls on movement in the region, authorities have arrested media workers and others and issued a vaguely worded emergency decree that could chill online discussion about Jordan's Covid-19 response. According to a decree issued on 15 April, sharing news that would "cause panic" about the pandemic in media or online can carry a penalty of up to three years in prison. Meanwhile, in

## ***Covid-19 has exposed the persistence of inequality of representation and agency***

Syria, the regime has politicized the public health crisis through claiming that the Syrian army (yes, the same army involved in various atrocious acts against the Syrian people) had cleansed many of the germs that were present on Syrian soil while reports suggested that the Syrian Electronic Army, the state-sponsored, pro-Assad hacking group, accessed a Covid-19 App to spy on opposition. Ultimately, we need to keep on asking who is saying what and who is allowed to speak because one thing Covid-19 has exposed is the persistence of inequality of representation and agency.

"Mehr News Agency / CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)"



### **Dina Matar**

*Head of the SIS and Centre for Global Media and Communication*

Dina is co-founder and co-editor of the Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, the first trans-cultural and cross-disciplinary space for critical engagement with communication, culture and politics of the contemporary Middle East. Dina recently authored 'The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication: Practices and Ideology'. *International Journal of Communication*, (13) (2019), pp 2398-2416.

---

#### **SIS Briefing Series editor:**

Dr Feja Lesniewska,

Senior Teaching Fellow in Global Energy and Climate Law and Policy, CISD - [fl7@soas.ac.uk](mailto:fl7@soas.ac.uk)