Examining the Role of Emotion as a Dimension of Affective Agenda Setting

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Abstract—The current study analyzed the coverage of Saudi–Yemen conflict as appeared in some of the most prominent newspapers originating from various key Sunni and Shia dominated countries in the MENA region. The newspapers originating from the U.S. and the U.K. were included to gauge affective agenda setting from a neutral perspective. Results indicate that regional newspapers did not considerably rely on the sectarian frames to invoke the emotions of their audiences. Instead, they rely more on blame shifting and humanitarian crises caused due to the action of the opposing party. This way, an already existed inter-sectarian differences and misunderstandings were fanned through maligning each other. In contrast, the Western media portrayed this conflict as a sectarian issue, while framing this as a Shia-Sunni conflict. This is a novel and interesting way to study affective agenda setting role of media that engages its audiences in an in-direct fashion to trigger emotions to form opinions based on their existing beliefs & convictions.

Keywords: Saudi Yemen conflict, Affective agenda setting, News frames Analyses

I. INTRODUCTION

Saudi military intervention in has put its mark on the political, social and economic outlook in the region. The main contenders in this conflict are the Houthis (a tribal congregation that dominates the northern parts of Yemen adjacent to the Saudi Arabian borders) and the Saudi led alliance of Sunni nations (Salisbury, 2015). Houthi tribes are believed to be backed by the Shia dominated Iran (Terrill, 2014). Saudi Arabia sternly reacted to the attempt by the Houthi Shi’ite rebels in Yemen to take over the entire country by forming an Arab-Sunni military alliance against the Houthis (Ottaway, 2015), thus forming this war into an ideological and emotional concern from the Muslims. This war is also perceived as a regional power play between Saudi Arabia and Iran that has enormous economic concerns for the entire world.

The Middle East and North African region (MENA, hereafter) is mostly governed by their indigenous ruling systems, dominated by their strong religious beliefs and subjects are expected to follow them (Bayat, 2013). Regional rivalries and animosities among countries in the MENA region are often used as legitimate reasons for the continuity of policies toward neighboring countries, which are often based on mistrust and fear (Terrill, 2014). National and state-owned print media is a viable tool (Hinnebusch, 2015) for these governments to carry on such policies to implement and shield their political agendas. Consequently, uniformity in stance and tone is expected throughout the national print media on domestic and international issues.

The Saudi-Yemen conflict is unique in many ways. Saudi Arabia perceives the Houthis as an Iranian proxy group, thus exacerbating the existing dispute between two rival nations (Salisbury, 2015). The Muslim world, in general, perceives this war as a clash between Sunni and Shia faiths (McAvoy, 2015). For some, this war signifies the decline of America’s influence in the Arab World, which is coincided with the rise of Iran’s influence which may pose challenges and concerns to the Middle East’s old monarchy order (McAvoy, 2015). This makes the current conflict more political rather religious in nature. Due to indiscriminate bombing of the targets located in the heavily populated areas, this conflict may be seen as a humanitarian crisis more than anything else. These mixed perceptions calls for an inquiry to explore the role of the agenda-setting role of media in their respective countries.

A. Significance of the Study

This study expends the theory of second-level agenda setting to include affective framing of the Saudi-Yemen conflict in the national press of some of the key countries in the MENA region. The current study demarcated key MENA countries according to their religious zeal and affiliation in order to study the agenda-setting role of their respective national media. The coverage of some portion of the events during that conflict is taken from the “independent” Western press as a reference or a “neutral” voice. This study analyzes the affective agenda setting role of the media based on their reader’s emotions. Frames from the selected stories across the dominated print media of selected countries were examined against their respective sectarian (Shia and Sunny) indexes to ascertain if that is how media frames the news stories in these countries to maintain status quo.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The media has always played a pivotal role in motivating people in any sort of conflict, and the MENA region is no exception. According to Zayani (2005), the role of the media particularly broadcast is always critical in shaping ideas and reconstructing Arab identities during any given crucial juncture in the Middle Eastern history and politics. This is important to note, however, that the traditional fourth estate
watchdog role of the media during any conflict in the Middle East is least expected because these media houses are largely owned or operated by the ruling elite in these countries (Donohue & Tichenor, 1995). Recent studies, mostly in the context of Arab Spring, have demonstrated the rise and effectiveness of social media as an alternative to that of state-owned traditional mediums (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013).

A. Agenda-Setting Role of the Media

Media is said to perform its agenda-setting functions at different levels. According to Coleman and Banning (2006), first-level agenda setting suggests an objective role for media to decide which issues public should be aware of. At the same time, they decide on the amount of coverage. The second-level agenda setting suggests the media also frames attributes of these issues, thus affecting how the issue is defined. Strong evidence is available to suggest that the affective attributes about any newsmakers or an event reported in the media influences the attributes public associates with those events or newsmakers (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez- Escobar & Rey, 1997).

The first well-documented evidence of the second-level agenda setting in the context of MENA region politics was evident during the 1973 Arab-Israel conflict, in which the Western media portrayed Arabs as extremists, controlled by militant Islamist groups such as Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), who opposed the Arab Israeli peace process to make their ends meet (Gerges, 2003). Till the acceptance of the PLO by the U.S. and Israel, a majority of the population in these countries holds up to this notion that Arabs are to be squarely blamed for the political instability in the Middle East. In contrast, Arab population deemed Israel and the U.S. as aggressors, who wanted to usurp their homeland and vast resources of oil (Telhami, 1993). In contrast, neighboring Jordanian population is somewhat in favor of keeping peace with Israelis because they held a less aggressive stance toward Israel and its expansionist agenda. According to Astorino-Courtois (1996), national leaders in Jordan encouraged public support for negotiated peace through identifying attributes of a peace accord, which are most salient to various population groups by presenting it in such a way.

Dimitrova, & Connolly-Ahern, (2007) analyzed the news frames regarding the 2003 Second Gulf war through quantitative content analysis, as appeared in the prestige news media in the U.S. and U.K. along with Egypt and Qatar. Their analyses revealed that different international media constructed the war differently from each other. Thus a signal most-watched event had many versions. Arab online news media were more likely to use the military conflict and violence of war frame; whereas, Coalition media emphasized the rebuilding of Iraq frame. They also noted difference in tone and intensity of news frames.

Earlier, Kaid, Williams& Trammell (2005) examined the coverage of the 2003 Iraq War on the home pages of some 246 international news Web sites. Their results revealed a significant difference in the frames appeared in the U.S. and non-U.S. media. U.S. media frames focused more heavily on the military conflict and human interest, while the responsibility frame was more common for international sites. Most importantly, the news coverage in countries officially supporting the war was more positive than in the countries opposing the war. These examples indicate that framing of the news is likely to be expected differently depending upon the national interests; however, there is no much evidence available, in which a military conflict is framed based on sectarian affiliation.

B. Affecting Framing in the Arab Media

People living in the Arab peninsula passionately follow their religious and cultural traditions, thus making it more vulnerable to any sort of emotional selling. Coleman & Wu (2010) noted that the media’s emotional –affective agenda corresponds with the public emotional expressions; whereas as, negative emotions are more powerful than the positive emotions; and agenda setting effects are greater on the audiences’ emotions as feelings rather than their cognitive assessments of the objects at hand.

Evidence suggests that different sectarian and ethnic groups in the Middle East, particularly in the active war zones, frame the media that reflects the cultural and ideological components of politics, which is important to interpret the grievances and reasons for mobilization (Cua, 2007). Iraq soon after the 2003 war that led to the fall of Saddam plunged into the Shia-Sunni civil war of 2006–2007, which was particularly charged with sectarian discourse in the form of songs, poems, speeches and publications (Haddad, 2013).

Al-Rawi (2013) studied the impact of sectarian dimension of news frames during the events of Arab Spring in Bahrain in 2011 and onwards. He noticed the element of sectarianism in both the liberal and the controlled media in this Sunni-dominated (a Muslim sect which is ideological against the Shia Muslims) country and press for that matter that used news frame in order to discredit the cause of the mostly Shiite protestors who were asking for equal rights and job opportunities despite the fact that they were actively taking part along with their Sunni counterparts in the protests against inequality and social injustice.

These trends indicate that media in the MENA region has a tendency to use the sectarian dimension as second-level agenda setting trough affective framing. The current military intervention of Saudi Arabia in Yemen is also a subject of such varied frames emerging through different media sources throughout the MENA region.

C. The Basis of Conflict Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

The Saudi-Yemen conflict is largely perceived as a Shia-Sunny proxy war between Shia-dominated Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is a leading regional Sunni power. The relations of Saudi Arabia with Iran is marred by the outcome of the last war in Iraq, expanding influence in the region, sectarian divisions in Lebanon, and by the desire of Saudi Arabia and Western allies to counter Iran’s expanding influence in the Middle East (Hadaad, 2013).

According to Hagood (2015), “The lack of political cohesion
and national identity in Yemen has left a vacuum for militant groups and foreign interference, a space where these two regional giants can act out their rivalry through the fragmented tribal population of the country.” Consequently, “Iran and Saudi Arabia use the media to portray their own distorted reality through the prism of their own agendas; and to compete with each other, they exaggerate this distortion.”

Though, it appears to be local conflict in its size and scope, where one stronger and organized power i.e. the Saudis are quelling the rebels who are amassed at their border to ensure their future safety. But in reality, this conflict has enormous consequences for the entire Muslim world in particular, and the rest of the world in general (Abbas, 2015).

Saudi Arabia is the home of two of the holiest shrines of the Muslims, and as one of the biggest donors and aid providers, Saudi Arabia is well respected by a majority of the Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia is directly or indirectly involved in funding so many projects in various Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia also represents the hard version Sunni line of Muslim faith, and those governments or authorities, which deemed Iran as a threat, are likely support or are physically in the Saudi-led coalition. Rest of world is bound to give coverage to this conflict because both Saudi Arabia and Iran are two giant and significant oil producers. After lifting off the sanctions by the U.S. on Iran, different governments are keen to reestablish their ties with Iran. This open up the possibility for portraying this conflict as a religious, instead of a political or military, by the Western world, in order to play a more politically correct role.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The events of the Saudi-Yemen conflict provide a unique opportunity to test the existing theory of agenda setting under an affective dimension driven by zealous religious sentiments of the people in the region. As noted, Saudi led coalition include the Sunni dominated countries. On the other hand, the insurgents in Yemen who are directly engaged with the Saudis may be backed by the Shia dominated powers in the region, other than Iran. We expect to find some frame variations across the MENA region news media in terms of portraying the conflicts and its events while appealing to the sentiments of their respective publics. At the same time, factors such as timeline of the conflict, country of origin, magnitude, and conflict aftermath are also expected to influence the news treatment to some extent. We expect the results of news frame analyses to be consistent with the tone and body of news stories. Using a content analysis method and a robust sample of news articles, the current study proposes the following hypotheses and research questions:

**H2:** Western media will portray the conflict as a humanitarian issue throughout the conflict.

**H3:** Both Sunni and Shia blocks will hold each other responsible for triggering the conflict and humanitarian crisis.

The data obtained after conducting content analyses of the online news stories is then statistically tested to find significant correlations to make meaningful projections.

IV. METHOD

To examine the study hypotheses and research questions, the online news content regarding the Saudi-Yemen conflict was extracted from some of the most prominent, accessible, and influential newspapers originating from various parts of the MENA region. Three countries were taken from the Sunni block (Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt). Selected newspapers from this block were the Saudi Gazette, Arab News, & Al-Riyadh from Saudi Arabia; Emirates Today, Gulf News, and the Arabian Post from the United Arab Emirates; and Arham Online, and Daily News from Egypt. Online news content form the two most prominent countries from the Shia block such as Iran and Iraq were included. From Iran, we chose Tehran Times, Iran Daily and its official news agency named Fars and from and Iraq, Daily Rudaw were included. Besides, the online news content originating from two western countries (U.S.A. and U.K.) were included such as N.Y. Times, Washington Post, and Daily express U.K. and The Independent. These papers were included due to their global reach and supposedly neutral stance toward the issue.

The criteria for demarcating countries into their respective Sunni and Shia blocks were high concentration (75% or above) of the followers of that sect in that country, the conformity of the official and declared faith of that state, and the controlling authorities or the governments over there. The chosen newspapers enjoy international repute, excellent credibility and trust among their respective readerships, and are entirely capable of producing their own news content. Besides, it was easier to locate their content online. In order to eliminate the chances of any sort of selection bias while selecting the news, a pattern was established to include news from the available online resources. The content was downloaded from the digital archives of LexisNexis, News Bank and, in some instances, the newspaper websites. Only those stories were selected if they directly related to events of the Saudi-Yemen conflict with 300 words or more. The latter criterion was used to ensure the news stories contain enough and substantial content about the conflict to be interpreted through a certain dimension. All the stories were divided into two blocks i.e. before and after the conflict. Pictorial description and tone of such news story was also recorded to be included in the analyses.

A. Coding Scheme

The researchers identified and coded thirteen variables in 210 news stories regarding Saudi-Yemen conflict between 1 January to 25 April and from 26 April to current, which were archived on the websites of the chosen newspapers originating from seven different countries besides databases These
variables were: (1) country block, (2) publication date, (3) writer identity of the news story, (4) use of visuals, (5) length of the story, (6) relevance to the conflict, (7) tone of the story, (8) purpose of the story, (9) main focus of the headline, (10) main focus of the news body, (11) prevalent frame, (12) secondary frame and (13), mentioning of the guilty party or the oppressor. Both coders coded fifty stories together to ascertain inter- coder reliability by establishing Krippendorff’s alpha of $\alpha = .96$. The remaining 160 stories were analysed by the same coders on almost equal basis.

The culmination period of this conflict was considered to be 25 February till 25 March 2015. March 25 is generally considered as the peak point in this conflict because that was the day when the president of Yemen fled to Saudi Arabia to take refuge (The Huffington Post, 2015). The story sample was thus divided into two groups depending upon before and after peak of the conflict to assess any change in framing and tone.

Country, writer, and visuals factors are capable of providing useful insights to the news selection criterion adopted by various news organizations. A preliminary analysis revealed both Saudi and Iranian newspapers were engaged with war related news around the peak period. The writer’s identity, if estimable, was coded in terms of his or her religious and geographical affiliation (Shia, Sunni or Westerner), along with the original source of the news story. A news story could be reported by the newspaper’s staff reporter or relayed from various news agencies such as Reuters or the Associated Press. Sometimes multiple references from various sources are provided to authenticate a story. This could lead to important clues into how the news organizations used their resources to collect and interpret a conflict -related coverage. Pictures and visual cues were inspected (presence or absence) to gauge human distress; sufferings and carnage resulted in the aftermath of the shelling. The inter-coder reliability was $\alpha = 1.00$ for all these variables.

The extent of conflict coverage in the news stories were noted on the continuous scale of 1 to 5, where 5 being extremely relevant to the conflict and 1 not-so-much-relevant. This step was taken to filter out any other agenda besides conflict coverage. Likewise, tone of the story in terms of vehemently stressing the viewpoint in the news story compared to more objective reporting was also assessed on the same continuous scale. This indicates the desire of the publication to produce an impact on its readers.

The message appearing in the headlines and news body was treated separately, as majority of the readers on the Internet only glimpse through the headlines. Different topics on both headlines and news body was noted and later analyzed for harmony and agreement between the headline and the news body. One of the major drawbacks of identifying news frames is the limitation of incorporating contextual factors that help shape the framing effects (Brewer & Gross, 2005). Keeping this inadequacy in view, the current study attempted to select episodic frames that were present in conflict related news while categorizing them into four main themes, namely, Saudi Intervention, Rebel insurgency, Iran’s Interference and American greater game in the region.

Multiple frames were expected in regards to the Saudi–Yemen conflict, particularly in the regional medium, since the toll of human suffering was very high, and it was almost impossible to slant the news without ignoring this humanitarian dimension. Therefore, secondary frames were also sought along with the primary frames. Longer stories were expected to have more than one focal point in terms of news frames. The extent of coverage focusing on human crisis is also expected to rise during different phases of the conflict. Therefore, a tentative time line was established to peripheries the conflict into two stages i.e. before and after the start of the conflict.

V. RESULTS

RQ1 inquired about the most prevalent frame used during the coverage of Saudi-led invasion on Yemen. Humanitarian crisis frame was noted the most as (primary 32% & secondary 34.3%, N= 210) in the overall sample, followed by accusing rivals of intervention (28.8%, N=210). The Western press mostly noted the sectarianism dimension against the expectations.

| Table 1: Presence of Primary Frames in the Saudi -Yemen Related News Stories |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Sectarian Issue | 23 | 11 |
| Insurgency | 29 | 13.8 |
| Intervention | 62 | 29.5 |
| Blame Shifting | 30 | 14.3 |
| Humanitarian Crisis | 60 | 31.4 |
| Total | 210 | 100 |

| Table 2: Presence of Secondary Frames in the Saudi -Yemen Related News Stories |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Sectarian Issue | 18 | 8.6 |
| Insurgency | 33 | 15.7 |
| Intervention | 67 | 31.9 |
| Blame Shifting | 26 | 9.5 |
| Humanitarian Crisis | 72 | 34.3 |
| Total | 210 | 100 |

RQ2 inquired about the any possible difference between the tone and approach in headlines and the news body used while covering the conflict by the regional ad Western media. A Pearson’s correlation was computed to assess the relationship between tone of the headlines and news body. There was a significant correlation between the two variables ($r = .877, n= 208, p < .01$).

Hypothesis H1 posited that the regional media would portray the conflict as a sectarian issue in the beginning of the conflict compared to the later stage. Applying a Univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the timeline and available frames found in the news stories tested the hypothesis. The Westerner media was secluded out of the computation. The results revealed that there was a significant effect of the timeline on the sectarian coverage at the $P < .001$ level during the three stages of the conflict ($F (2, 54) = 2.69, p = .000$).

Hypothesis H2 posited that the Western media would portray the conflict as a humanitarian issue throughout the conflict. Sectarian frames were recoded as a separate variable and a one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of reporting block on the new variable. There was a significant effect of reporting block was noted when the humanitarian frames are presented at the $P < .05$ level ($F (4,1)$...
VI. DISCUSSION

Within the context of the Arab-Yemen conflict, the current study provided some important clues and useful insights into how affective agenda setting may take shape, particularly when people’s emotions are high and backed by their popular and religious convictions and beliefs. Effective agenda setting does not need to be obvious, but can be applied under a more benign way by endorsing the existing sentiments of the readers. The study’s results indicate that fanning sectarianism was rarely on the agenda of the popular mediums of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, however; they use humanitarian frames to malign and blame each other of tremendous human suffering caused due to the acts of war. Saudi Arabia has reacted to the attempt by Houthi Shi’ite rebels in Yemen to take over the entire country with Iranian backing by forming for the first time a Arab Sunni military alliance against the Houthis (Ottaway, 2015). Houthis gain most of their strength and backing (military and political) from Iran and its Shia allies. Therefore, this conflict, on face, was very much appearing to be a proxy war between Shia and Sunnis. Despite this fact, the regional press avoided portraying this conflict as a Shia –Sunni conflict.

It is interesting to note that the Western media was not shy of dubbing the conflict as a Shia –Sunni conflict, since not only it used these terms consistently while refereeing to Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also it portrayed this conflict as such to its readership. As far as the regional media is concerned, the media on both sides were quick to shift blames on each other for massive war casualties, and indiscriminate and blatant disregard for civilian lives. Through blame shifting, both blocks fanned the sentiments and misunderstandings against each other to influence their publics, but without referring to the sectarianism dimension. One possible reason why blames were not based on sectarianism might be because it was too obvious that Saudi represents Sunnis, and Iran is a symbol of Shia-ism in the region and the Muslim World; therefore, it was generally a known fact for the Muslim world that do not need to be reminded about it. Perhaps, that is why the sectarian dimension is kept latent and undermined by the regional media despite its definite role behind the conflict. For example, Pakistan refused to become a part of the Saudi led alliance on the plea that she cannot afford to offend her 24% Shia population (Abbas, 2015) confirming the underlying notion about this conflict. The Western media, on contrast, appears to be more interested in branding this conflict as a Sunni-Shia one, since the Western population does not share or understand these deep religious sentiments among Muslims that divides them on the sectarian lines.

These findings hint toward exploring the affective agenda-setting role of the media through a different perspective. The analyses of the frames clearly indicates that both sides have blames each other for triggering the conflict while particularly focusing on a massive humanitarian crises. Both sides conducted the practice to malign each other without mentioning any sectarian involvement. However, the sectarian divide between the conflicting parties are very well understood, and perceived as such among the Muslim world in particularly; therefore, there is a good chance that people of this region may interpret and assess this conflict as a Sunni- Shia one because they don’t need any reminder cue to interpret Iranian as a Shia-dominated state and Saudi Arabia as a Sunni state. At the same time, the stress upon the humanitarian crisis dimension is capable of execrate the sentiments against each block. This way, the sectarian feelings are flamed by not directly focusing on it, but through attributing to the human suffering.

The Western world, particularly the United States is rapidly changing its hard stance toward Iran after settling a deal with her on the nuclear issue. Presuming that the U.S. independent media is helpful to achieve the U.S. government its goal to make that deal acceptable among the U.S. general public and its international readership, the line of the affective agenda-setting that the Western media seems to be adopted, is more suitable and diplomatic, in which there is no direct mentioning of the names of the countries to blame, but putting more stress on the human crisis on sectarianism is helpful in saving the image of Iran, as well as helping the Saudis who are the long-time allies to the U.S.

Keeping the view the different patterns of reading news in print- and online versions of a newspaper, this study assessed the uniformity of substance and tone in the headlines and news body. The online headlines are tend to be more catchy and person can easily browse self away from the news, if there is no direct correlation is noted in the coverage of Saudi- Yemen conflict in the Western media. The Western world, particularly the United States is rapidly changing its hard stance toward Iran after settling a deal with her on the nuclear issue. Presuming that the U.S. independent media is helpful to achieve the U.S. government its goal to make that deal acceptable among the U.S. general public and its international readership, the line of the affective agenda-setting that the Western media seems to be adopted, is more suitable and diplomatic, in which there is no direct mentioning of the names of the countries to blame, but putting more stress on the human crisis on sectarianism is helpful in saving the image of Iran, as well as helping the Saudis who are the long-time allies to the U.S.

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there is no ideological or any other sort of commitment is involved. For example, the tone of the newspapers against the protesters during the Arab Spring was harsh but once they started gaining ground in Egypt and Tunisia, the tone gradually become soft (see, Rasul & Asim, 2014). Same patterns were noted about the protesters in the Western press. It is generally believed, the more newspapers are commitment to the cause, and the more their stance, valance and tone remained unchanged. For example, during the Saudi-Yemen conflict, each block would support the same stance that their country took, was expected to remain unchanged. This however, may have some other valid reasons such as this conflict produced a limited effect on the general population of Saudi Arabia or Iran. Plus, the influence of the undermined factors such as media ownership, allegiance, & loyalty cannot be ignored.

As predicted in Hypothesis H3, the Western media has stressed more heavily on the humanitarian aspect compared to any other aspect of this ongoing conflict. There could be two possible explanations, first, the extent of human suffering is capable of expressing the gravity of the situation and secondly, the Western media can avoid taking sides overtly.

VII. LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

These findings are not without having their limitations. First, the online news sample chosen from the MENA region media cannot be considered as a truly representative sample because it was in the English language, and likely directed toward broader International audiences. It was an obstacle on part of the researchers to consider while having very limited ability to translate Arabic papers in their true spirit into English. For future, it is strongly recommended to include the Arabic and more local news outlets to assess the true nature of communication aimed at the locals people. Such projects should be conducted with collaboration with those researchers who can understand the true spirit of Arabic politics and culture depicted in their mainstream and regional Arabic newspapers.

Secondly, the Saudi-Yemen conflict is an undergoing event; therefore, the data obtained is limited in duration and in scope. Without knowing a logical conclusion of the Saudi-Yemen conflict, it will be immature to form opinion on this event. As witnessed in the case of the events of Arab Spring, it was the social media, not print or broadcast, that mobilizes masses. Knowing this fact, newspapers may not deem normal printed stories as an effective way of affective agenda setting. This will make them to focus more on objectivity and blame sharing, rather than influencing the ideological or sectarian concerns of their readership. Majority of the newspapers now provide online forums to let reader discuss the stories usually in a provided space after each story to express their own opinion. Most of readers, comments however, require newspapers approval before becoming a part of that news story. These comments need to be analyzed to ascertain how newspapers are controlling the public opinion.

Another limitation of the current study is the inadequate number of stories extracted from each selected publication for analyses. This may not only undermine the true stance of the publications involved toward an event, but also make the finding less significant. Similar studies have explored thousands, if not less, of online news and websites to conclude meaningful findings.

The future direction in this direction should include conducting comparison studies that can accommodate social networking alongside of traditional mediums to gauge the influence on each other. This study strongly suggests an underlying role of social mediums during the events of Arab Spring. Besides this, more local newspapers should be consulted, which are not directed toward wider international audiences.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The current Saudi military intervention in Yemen has been echoed differently throughout the world as Yemen insurgency, Saudi aggression, Iran’s intervention, Saudi- Iran’s proxy war, Sunny- Shia conflict and a humanitarian crisis. This event provides an opportunity to assess reader’s sentiments and emotional involvement with this event as steered by the second-level affective agenda-setting role of the media. This event may carry an emotional dimensional due to Muslim world’s dominations and sectarian associations throughout the region. The current study analyzed the coverage of this conflict as appeared in some of the most prominent online newspapers originating from various key Sunni and Shia blocks countries in the MENA region. In addition to that, the online newspapers originating from the U.S. and the U.K. were included to gauge affective agenda setting from a neutral perspective.

Results indicate that regional newspapers did not rely on the sectarian frames to invoke the emotions of their audiences. Instead, they rely more on blame shifting and humanitarian crisis emerged due to the action of the opposed party. This way, maligning each other fanned an already existed inter-sectarian understanding. In other words, where the hatred and understanding against other sects are so deep-rooted, there is no need to remind people about the archness of the opposite sects. In contrast, the Western media portrayed this conflict as a sectarian issue, since people in the West are neither pro-Sunni nor pro-Shia nor they have strong sentiments toward any side. The Humanitarian frames were not much emphasized previously by the MENA region countries. Therefore, it is concluded that it is a new dimension in affective agenda that reply on an in-direct approach (i.e., instead of venting differences between Sunnis or Shias, just indicate how much suffering they inflict on innocents) to trigger emotions to form opinions.

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