

## Themes of Peace and War in the Jordanian Al-Rai Daily 2006<sup>(1)</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In a troubled region, such as the Middle East, the media, by virtue of their influence on public opinion, play a significant role in matters related to war and peace. Generally, it is believed that the media set the agenda for the public. The question that this paper addresses is: how Al-Rai daily columnists of the Op-Ed page treated topics of war and peace, and themes of conflict and cooperation during October 2006? This was time when discord was raging in many Middle East countries, notably Israel's war in Lebanon with Hizb Allah, divisions within the Palestinian Authority (Gaza and the West Bank), and the armed resistance to Alliance Forces in Iraq. Research suggests that the majority of daily columnists and contributors supported peaceful solutions. The tone of the writers was generally reconciliatory. However, Palestinians were harshly criticized for internal fighting, mainly between Hamas and Fatah, while Israel was criticized just as harshly for the destruction of Lebanon and for not working hard enough to bring peace into the occupied Palestinian territories. The US, a major actor in the Middle East, was widely criticized. Locally, the columnists criticized the Jordanian Government on several issues.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Conflict, Cooperation, Public opinion, Agenda-setting, Content analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

In a troubled region, such as the Middle East, the media, by virtue of their influence on public opinion, play a significant role in public opinion in matters related to war and peace, conflict and cooperation. The printed media usually addresses the elite (Paletz and Entman, 1981: 185-6), and this is true in the Middle East (Rugh, 1979: 21), as the majority of the population prefers electronic media, namely direct Satellite TV, due to, among other reasons, the high rate of illiteracy. In

fact, the Middle East has witnessed an explosion in electronic transmission in the past few years. With the coming of the digital revolution, news' channels have characterized themselves as remarkably singular. Certain news channels, such as *Al Jazeera* and *Al-Arabieh* have stood out. This explosion allowed for diffusion of information on a very wide scale, as never before. Its impact is described by some researchers as having the potential to "radically alter the relationships between states and citizens, those between states, and those between the region and the rest of the world" (Alterman, 1998: 1).

Preoccupation with peace undoubtedly concerns many. Images created by media shape readers' perceptions about matters of war or peace and conflict or cooperation. Mousa concluded few years ago that in the wake of signing a peace treaty, brokered by the U.S, between Egypt and Israel, the present images of the Arabs – as being too negative – and the Israelis – as being too favorable, would impede any unilateral U.S. foreign policy-move to bring about the two sides

<sup>(1)</sup> This paper was originally presented at: **The Peace, X-National Communication, Identity and Media (PaXIM) Conference**; May 20-23, 2007. Washington State University (WSU)-Pullman, WA. The author expresses thanks to Dr Suzan Ross (WSU), and to the Middle East University for Graduate Studies, for support.

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Received on 18/2/2008 and Accepted for Publication on 9/3/2010.

together. This is due to biases inflicted upon both sides' images (1991: 241).

Comprehensive peace has not been achieved in the Middle East though one more Arab state, Jordan, signed another peace treaty with Israel in 1993. Thus, a worthy question would be: what the role of Jordanian press was in relation to matters of war and peace and conflict and cooperation in the region during a critical juncture when conflict was raging in many countries in the Middle East during October 2006?

#### **Theoretical framework:**

In recent years, direct Satellite TV and the internet brought in changes, and allowed for varied views to be attended to. William Rugh, in his two well known works on Arab media, classifies Arab media of the late 1970's as mostly authoritarian in nature, with some differences of degree between printed media in individual Arab states. He contends that in most "of the Arab countries the media operates under variations of the authoritarian theory" (1979: 25). He classifies these variations into three subcategories: the Loyalist (which exists in Arab kingdoms), the Mobilization (which exists in Arab republics) and finally, the Diversified (existed at the time in Lebanon, Morocco and Kuwait). But, in his most recent work, Rugh, in light of the new digital media, develops these categories, and adds a fourth, Transitional (2004: 25-26). This upgrading is a testimony by a noted scholar that the Arab media in some Arab countries, amongst which was Jordan, have witnessed some changes.

On the other hand, the press plays a significant role in setting the agenda of the public. It has been suggested that the "agenda of the news media becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public", which is an "initial stage in the formation of public opinion" (McCombs, 2006: 2). Therefore, the question that can be raised now is what issues the 'Opinion and Editorials' (Op-ed) page in the Jordanian press focused on at a critical stage in October 2006 during the raging conflicts in the region, and if the Op-Ed page would reflect a positive or negative stand regarding the concept of peace with Israel.

**Historical Backdrop:** Jordanian printed media came into being in 1923, when the first semi-official newspaper, *Al-Sharq Al-Arabi*, was published two years after the Jordanian State came into being. Before that, Jordan constituted a neglected domain of the Ottoman Empire. Following the Arab Revolt of 1916, the State of Jordan was created after arrangements were made then with the mandatory power, Great Britain. A handwritten photo-copied simple "newspaper", *Al-Haq Ya'lo* (Right Prevails), came into being in Jordan in 1920-1921, when Prince (later King) Abdullah 1, the founder of the Kingdom, moved into Jordan from Hejaz. Six issues of this newspaper came out and were distributed on a small scale in the towns of Ma'an and Amman.

In 1927, privately owned press came into being, and *Al-Urdun* (editor and owner Khaleel Nasser) newspaper survived longest (1927-1982). During the Emirate era (1921-1946), all printed papers were weekly, until 1948, when the *Al-Nasr* weekly (editor and owner Subhi Jalal Al-Quttob), was published on a daily basis for a short time. Dailies began to appear in Jordan in the early 1950s on regular basis, prominent among those were two Palestinian dailies, *Falasteen* and *Al Difa'*, which moved from Palestine into Jordan after the creation of Israel in 1948 (Mousa, 1998: 119-123).

*Al-Rai* daily, which content was analyzed for the purposes of this study, came into being in 1971 as a semi-official newspaper. It was sold partially to the private sector in 1984. At present, the private sector owns around 35% of its shares, and the public sector owns the rest. Thus, the board of directors appoints the chief editor. *Al-Rai* is noted for widest circulation among Jordanian dailies (at present the dailies are seven Arabic, and one English); it has the highest rate of advertising, and thus might be considered a leading newspaper in the country, and its news and comments are influential (Mousa, 1998: 147-150). As mentioned earlier, Rugh in his oldest work classifies Jordanian press as "Loyalist", but in his recent work he considers it "Transitional", which he describes as "a complex system that contains strong elements favoring governmental controls over the press, alongside elements that provide some measure of

freedom of expression and diversity” (2004: 121).

**The Problem:**

The question that this paper attempts to tackle is how *Al-Rai* daily columnists of Op-Ed page treated topics of war and peace, and conflict and cooperation during October 2006, when discord was raging in many Middle East countries: Israel’s war in Lebanon with Hizb Allah, divisions within the Palestinian Authority (Gaza and the West Bank), and the armed resistance to Alliance forces in Iraq. Hence, it would be of importance to see how the Op-Ed page writings of an influential newspaper treated these matters in such a period to find out if the writers were advocating peace and cooperation, or pushing for conflict and war?

**Methodology:**

Three issues were content analyzed for the Op-ed subject matter for this study. These covered three days of October 1; October 4; and October 10, 2006. The sampling procedure is based on similar studies, which found out that a sample of 4 - 6 issues of a daily newspaper was close in its averages to averages of an entire month (Stemple, Jones and Carter, Merrit). Thus, the three issues used should adequately represent a period covering the last days of August and the first two weeks of October, 2006. The unit of analysis was the item.

Based on the research question, five content categories were developed. These were:

1. *Type of Theme*: In this category topics were analyzed according to whether they have advocated peace and cooperation, or war and conflict, or neither (neutral).
2. *Regional Nations*: In this category, topics were analyzed according to the countries in the Middle East that attracted the attention of editorialists and were discussed by them.
3. *Other International Nations*: In this category, topics were analyzed according to the international countries that attracted the attention of editorialists and were discussed by them.
4. *Contexts*: In this category, topics were analyzed according to issues that editorialist discussed whether they were political, social, military,

religious, cultural or economic.

5. *Censure/Criticism*: This category analyzed the country/nation that was criticized/blamed by the editorialists.

Intercoder reliability was 91 percent<sup>(2)</sup>.

**Findings**

A total of 46 topics were analyzed for subject matter table (1) shows that the majority of themes (55%) called for reconciliation, peace, and cooperation, while just a minority (1:5) advocated conflict. Table 2 shows that Jordanian issues were the highest among nations/regions discussed during the three days of analysis. This suggests that columnists paid a great deal of attention to local issues. However, issues regarding Palestinian, Israel, Iraq and Lebanon followed next and dealt with matters covering Palestinian's conflicting among each other ( Hamas and Fatah) and with Israel, Israel's war with Lebanon's Hizb Allah (after the latter kidnapped two Israeli soldiers), the conflict in Iraq (between Iraqis and terrorists and the Allied forces led by the Americans). Darfur in Sudan, a conflicted area, has received a slight, but observable, attention too.

**Table (1): Type of Theme\***

Theme calls for:	Frequency	Percentage
Peace/cooperation	28	55.5%
War/conflict	11	21.5%
Neutral	12	23.5%
Totals	51	100.00%

\* Multiple coding was permitted.

<sup>(2)</sup> The following formula was used for intercoder reliability:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{Total number of category assignment agreements}}{\text{Total number category assignments by coders}}$$

By category, reliability was as following:

Category	Reliability
Type of Theme	89%
Regional Nations	94%
Other International Nations	95%
Contexts	90%
Who is censured/blamed	87%

**Table (2): Regional Nations \***

Nations/Regions:	Frequency	Percentage
Jordan	22	17.5%
Palestine Authority	16	12.5%
Arab countries in general	15	11.5%
Israel, Zionism	16	12.5%
Iraq	11	8.5%
Lebanon	9	7.0%
Iran	6	4.5%
Egypt	5	4.0%
Islamic Countries	4	3.0%
Syria	3	2.3%
Kuwait	3	2.3%
Sudan (Darfur)	2	1.5%
Oman	2	1.5%
Saudi Arabia	2	1.5%
UAE	2	1.5%
The Middle East	2	1.5%
Others**	8	6.5%
Others**	128	100.00%

\* Multiple coding was permitted.

\*\* The following scored 1: Morocco, Tunisia, Bahrain, Algeria, Somalia, Christianity, Yemen, Hizb Allah.

**Table (3): Other International Nations \***

Nations/Regions:	Frequency	Percentage
U.S.	10	20.4%
International Community	5	10.2%
China	4	8.1%
Europe (France and Germany)	4	8.1%
Russia	3	6.1%
Korea	3	6.1%
UN	3	6.1%
The Pope	3	6.1%
Pakistan	2	4.1%
India	2	4.1%
Japan	2	4.1%
Others**	8	16.5%
Totals	49	100.00%

\* Multiple coding was permitted.

\*\* The following scored 1: Nazism, Australia, NGO, Afghanistan, Chile, Ethiopia, Vietnam, the West.

Table (3) shows the US scored highest, getting almost one fifth (20.4%) of the total attention given by columnists to foreign international nations which they discussed. Half of this attention was given equally almost to: the International Community, China and Europe. The Korean issue received clear interest in regard to its nuclear test in equivalent manner to the Pope's statement, in which he associated Islam with violence, as well as Russia and the UN.

Table (4) shows that political contexts attracted the highest attention (38.6%) among all topics discussed (2:5); next second came the social (19.3%) and military (17.1%). Religious was an important context attracting more than 1/5th of the topics. Economic and cultural were distinct, but though little.

**Table (4): Contexts \***

Contexts:	Frequency	Percentage
Political	34	38.5%
Social	17	19.3%
Military	15	17.1%
Religious	12	13.6%
Economic	6	6.9%
Cultural	4	4.6%
Totals	88	100.00%

\* Multiple coding was permitted.

Finally, table (5) shows that the highest censure/criticism goes to Israel and Palestinians equally (24.5%). This variable is concerned with who of the actors/nations was blamed/criticized by the editors as failing to achieve what they were supposed to. Thus, the analysis shows the concern of the columnists who gave almost 1/4th of their editorial attention over matters related to the Israelis and the Palestinians, as major actors, for failing to create peace. The US came next high (16.3%) indicating that this country bears, in the eyes of the editors, quite a significant responsibility in international affairs and thus should be censured. Jordanian government was criticized mainly on local issues. Muslims and Iraqis were

criticized more than the rest of others (i.e.: The Pope, Terrorism, Lebanese factions, International community, and Arab Governments in general).

**Table (5): Who is Censured/criticized? \***

Censure/criticism:	Frequency	Percentage
Palestine Authority	12	24.5
Israel	12	24.5
US	8	16.3
Jordan	7	14.3
Muslems	3	6.1
Iraqis	2	4.0
Others**	5	10.2
Totals	49	100.00

\* Multiple coding was permitted.

\*\*The following scored 1: The Pope, Terrorism, Lebanese factions, International community, and Arab Governments in general.

### DISCUSSION

The writers in the Op-Ed page are of two types: columnists who write on daily or weekly basis, and contributors of several occupations, such as professors or ex-ministers or just ordinary people with views. Thus, the analysis provides a wide spectrum of views, written mostly by the elite for matters that preoccupy Jordanians at the time, with emphasis on major issues of interest at the times, mainly the war between Israel and Hizb Allah in Lebanon. Thus the views, as reflected in the above tables, dealt with varied topics, local and international, and many were related to matters of conflict, which rage in the whole world. The following discussion gives a summary of what were the main issues discussed by both columnists and contributors.

Hattab, a columnist, dealt with Rice's intended visit to the Middle East. He said that the "US should listen to voices in the Middle East other than those of Israel, and look for its interests in the whole region and not in Israel only" (Oct. 1, p. 50). Rawashdeh said Rice is "mistaken to think that the main cause [of concern] for the Arabs is Iran...Arabs first priority is to solve the Palestinian question and to end occupation of Iraq and help install peace in the region". He refers to President

Bush's failing promise to help create a Palestinian state by 2005 (ibid.). Rimawi criticized US policy as paying lip service to peace while in reality it encourages wars, and he added that all Arabs have adopted a moderate policy (ibid.).

Kharoub, a columnist, believes that Korea's nuclear test was timed to gain better negotiating conditions; but the American administration, which is waging a battle to win elections amidst scandals and sending Rice to the Middle East to crystallize a position to pressure Iran to close its nuclear file was placed in an embarrassing situation (October, 4, 2006). Mashaqbeh, a political scientist who writes occasionally in the paper, says that Amman's Message on Islam emphasizes moderation, and even Western scholars who participated in a conference (held recently in the Hashemite University - where he teaches) admitted that "Islam by nature is not an extremist religion" and he gives an example on that of the Moslem Brothers in Jordan in comparison with the Islamic movement in Algeria (ibid). Amayereh, a columnist, and Hattab both criticize the fighting Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fatah and remind them of "the brutal massacres" Israel committed which helped "create an atmosphere of terrorism that paved the way, with the help of an International attitude of 'look and see', to create extremism" among Palestinian organizations. The two writers conclude that what happens in Palestine today is the result of authoritarian rule (ibid). Two other writers were critical of Palestinians being divided: Ma'an Abu Nuwar, an ex-deputy prime minister, writes: "Israel is united...Palestinians have divisions"; and he calls for their unity. Fara'naeh, an ex-Parliamentarian, was critical of Palestinians and Israelis alike: Israel is blamed as she is believed to be behind the Palestinians' factious war. Hamas and Fatah are both blamed (ibid.). Kashou also criticizes Hamas and Fatah and urges them to stop fighting according to Cairo Accords (ibid). Rimawi praises UAE elections (ibid). Two others, Bdoor, a sociologist, criticizes the Jordanian government for not working hard enough to develop an area in southern Jordan, and Awamleh, an occasional writer, demands

economic reform (ibid.).

In the third issue of the newspaper, the columnists are truly worried as they see the Middle East not stable. Tleilan, an occasional writer, believes that since Sept. 11, the role of religion has become an important factor; thus the US triggered the War of (religious) terror which led to Islam-Christianity confrontation. Even resistance movements became terrorist bands in the eye of the US and the West. These religious wars are waged close to where petrol exists. Europe will suffer as a result (Oct. 10, 2006). Hattab reiterates his criticism of Fatah and Hamas in their fratricide battling. But Rawashdeh sees that the conflict in Palestine may spill over to Jordan, as there are groups of these two Palestinian organizations in Jordan. He calls for Jordan to be ready to face such a thing if it happens. Ma'ayteh calls for a dialogue between Fatah and Hamas and criticizes Israel and the International community for watching the scene only without doing anything (ibid.). Salem calls the Palestinians to be rational and put fighting aside (ibid.). Ajlouni, a columnist, sees that Islam was a factor that made the Arabs, Turks and Persians partners (ibid.). Rimawi criticizes intellectual and (Moslem) religious leaders who ignore the suffering of their fellow Muslims who are massacred in Moslem countries, and concludes by saying that Arabs are targeted by terrorists and racists in the West and the North and even some of our own people (ibid.). Ms. Aloul, a weekly columnist, criticizes some Muslims' behavior during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, as many eat fatty food, and students' waste time by watching TV until a late hour which make them go to schools the following day weary and not prepared. Also, working-mothers have to work harder to prepare meals which reflect on productivity (ibid.). Kawar, a columnist, criticizes the Government for not tackling the issue of traffic. Kharroub believes that the US and the West will accept the nuclear situation as it developed in North Korea. Nassouh Al-Majali (an ex-Information Minister) criticizes the Governemnts'

passing "tens" of laws during the past two years without giving people enough time to be familiar with their content (ibid.). Fara'neh supports the government's position for bringing an ex-minister to justice on a corruption issue. Qutami, a professor and occasaional writer, criticizes media campaigns among Arabs and those made by Al-Hurrah channel (an American directed to the Arab World) (ibid.).

### CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of a Jordanian daily shows that the majority of daily columnists and contributors support peaceful solutions. The tone was generally peacefully reconciliatory, in particular towards the Middle East conflict; but writers expressed criticism of major actors for failing to bring peace. Palestinians were criticized harshly for fighting among each other, mainly between Hamas and Fatah, while Israel was criticized harshly for the destruction of Lebanon and not for working hard enough to bring peace into the occupied Palestinian territories. The US was a major actor that showed in most writings, and was criticized widely. Conflict in Lebanon and Korea attracted attention higher than Iran or Sudan, but all were noticeable. Finally, it is obvious that the Jordanian columnists and contributors are very much interested in international issues, reflecting the wide range of concerns that Jordanians generally are conscious of. They mostly called for reconciliation, peace, and cooperation in regard to the Middle East conflict. Locally, the columnists criticized the Government on several issues, proving that the Jordanian press in the Transitional Era, according to Rugh, has opened up noticeably.

#### Limitations of the Study:

It is well known that the daily columnists might be very influential in setting the agenda for the readers, or reflect the social or political agenda as it exists. Any future analysis, therefore, should include the other dailies.

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