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How to analyze visual propaganda in the Middle East: An analysis of imagery in the "Saudi Strike Force Movie"

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Abstract

This paper provides an innovative approach to visual analysis in the Middle East. It addresses a fundamental problem in the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Securitization Theory (ST): they largely ignore the visual. This project develops a methodology for visual analysis. Its utility is demonstrated through an examination of a Saudi propaganda video, entitled "Saudi Strike Force Video." When observing the Saudi-Iranian rivalry on social media, there is a prevalence of visceral visual propaganda. Thus, the need for the construction of a systematic model for its analysis is important in addressing this conceptual gap. CDA and ST are aligned on an essential belief that discourse is a power-laden process, and that to affect change, scholars must attempt to understand its production, articulation, and impact. Yet, both of these approaches tend to focus on the written and spoken word, negating the importance of the visual. This paper contends that the visual is equally power-laden, having a profound effect as a tool of propaganda

KEYWORDS

Iran, Media and the Middle East, Saudi Arabia

This paper provides an innovative approach to visual analysis in the Middle East. It addresses a fundamental problem in the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Securitization Theory (ST): they largely ignore the visual. Expanding upon the work of J. Wang (2014), this project develops a methodology for visual analysis in the Middle East. Its utility is demonstrated through an examination of a Saudi propaganda video entitled "Saudi Strike Force Movie" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017). When observing the Saudi-Iranian rivalry on social media, there is a prevalence of visceral visual propaganda. Thus, there is a need for the construction of a systematic model for its analysis to address this conceptual gap. CDA and ST are aligned on an essential belief that discourse is a power-laden process, and that to effect change, scholars must attempt to understand its production, articulation, and impact. Yet both of these approaches tend to focus on the written and spoken word, negating the importance of the visual. This paper contends that the visual is similarly power-laden, having a profound effect as a tool of propaganda. This reality has become increasingly apparent in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, in which propagandized images are spread by state-sponsored accounts across social media. This paper aims to characterize the specificity of visuality in Saudi propaganda. To reapply the logic of CDA and ST to an understanding of the visual on social media, the paper will outline a model for a systematic visual analysis, as well as a concise understanding of the specificity of the visual as a tool of propaganda in the Middle East.

This paper innovates around approaches to CDA and ST, to provide a methodological approach for the analysis of the still and moving images in Middle Eastern international relations. It is telling that "in more than 20 years" development of CDA, "it has mainly focused on verbal texts, and ignored the visual as secondary to verbal texts" (J. Wang, 2014, p. 265). This paper directly confronts this gap in the literature. This project answers the analytical call, to develop a model of visual analysis, "with heightened sensitivity to the contexts of reading, changing nature of surrounding cultural codes and discourses as well as the often 'contradictory'... meanings found within instances of... visualisation" (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 220). The paper's approach, once detailed, will be applied to a video entitled "Saudi Strike Force Movie" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017), which has formed a part of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) power-projection in the New Middle East Cold War (NMECW) (Gause, 2014).

Through this, the model's efficacy as a research tool is demonstrated. It offers insight into the inner workings of state decision-making processes during times of insecurity and conflict, tracing the use of symbolism. ST is traditionally concerned with the manipulative power of state actors, portraying them as characters that arbitrarily raise fear among populations for their own rational self-interest (Buzan et al., 1998). Conversely, this paper borrows more heavily from Balzacq's understanding, which argues that "the success of securitization is highly contingent upon the securitising actor's ability to identify with the audience's feelings, needs and interests" (Balzacq, 2005, p. 84). Thus, part of the job of creating an applicable model is carefully understanding the politically salient identities within the specific case study. State securitization narratives depend on context but are always power-laden (Bouvier & Machin, 2018; Fairclough, 2003, p. 178). This paper borrows from poststructuralism in arguing that, ontologically, "meaning can never be finally fixed; it is always in flux, unstable and precarious" (Wetherell, 1998, p. 397). Methodologies thus need to be malleable enough to fit specific case studies.

Across media studies (Ericson et al., 1987; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Mowlana et al., 1992), social sciences (Ball & Smith, 1992), security studies (Amoore, 2007; MacKenzie, 2020), and CDA (Hansen, 2011; Schlag, 2016), attempts have been made to analyze the visual. Nevertheless, none have provided a methodological framework that is sophisticated enough

to analyze the specificity of the visual in the Middle East. A common critique of visual analysis is similar to that of CDA, which is that "the systematic ways in which the methods unfold are left implicit" (Legrecco & Tracy, 2009, p. 20). J. Wang's (2014) model borrows from Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) notion of "visual grammar," to provide a triadic approach to visual analysis. This is broadly defined as: visual design, visual interpretation, and visual explanation. This paper innovates around Wang's model, updating it to analyze the given case study.

The paper then analyses one prominent example of Saudi visual propaganda: the "Saudi Strike Force Movie" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017), providing a demonstration of the researcher's thought process. This focus is done in the aim of guiding future research. The detailed description circumnavigates the issue that images cannot be included due to copyright laws. The video constructs KSA as the strong, legitimate protector of the Islamic world, through frames of sectarian identity/anti-Iranianism, Islamic nationalism, humanitarianism, and militarism. It was chosen for this reason; emblematic of the NMECW.

1 | THE IMAGE AS A TOOL OF LEGITIMIZATION: ST AND SECURITY STUDIES

This section devises a new approach to ST. These adaptations are made in pursuit of a project, which aims to update the theory, making it suitable for contemporary studies of the visual in the Middle East.

Securitization theorists view discourse as a power-laden concept (Buzan et al., 1998). Balzacq (2005) updated the theory from one of a transactional speech act, viewing securitization as "a strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of, a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psychocultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction" (p. 72). Elites speak, but the development of discourse is a continuous process that involves the audience, especially in the world of social media. The success of securitization is reliant upon the elite's awareness of, and ability to play upon, the sentiments of the audience. As Hansen et al. (1998) observed, "[t]he power of an image to appeal to, mobilise, or engage with deep-seated feelings, hopes and fears may be what really counts" (p. 199).

This understanding should not detract from understanding the primary goals of visual propaganda, pertaining to issues of realpolitik. State elites in Iran and KSA have used "the image" to gather support for extraordinary measures; foreign policy designed to protect their regime security. "Regime security," as opposed to "national security," is a better characterization of rational foreign policy calculations in the Middle East, during an era in which undemocratic regimes are facing increasing challenges to their legitimacy. To counter these threats, "elites can choose aspects of their regime identity, attach new meaning to them, and use them as symbols to mobilise people" (Darwich, 2019, p. 9). This paper describes the politicization of identities as "functionally constructivist." State actors are using identity to justify policies that protect their rational security interests. Identities are not the primary motivational drivers behind Riyadh's foreign policy; rather, they are used cynically to justify it.

Overall, securitization theorists have paid little attention to the visual. However, there is burgeoning scholarship within the broader field of security studies. Specifically relevant to the praxis of ST is Feldman's (2005) idea of the "actuarial gaze" (p. 212). In the Middle East, this "gaze" "'screens' representations of threat and 'screen[s]-off' the violent consequences of the remotely operated war waged in response to that threat" (Galai, 2019, p. 296). This insight is

relevant to ST, as it constitutes a specific type of visuality, representing "a fundamental shift in the way war is legitimized" (Galai, 2019, p. 296). Similarly, Amoore's (2007) work on the War on Terror showed "how a particular mode of vigilant or watchful visuality has come to be mobilized in the 'homefront' of the so-called war on terror" (p. 215). In other words, specific visual frames have been used as propaganda to legitimize the global the War on Terror. This is equally true of Riyadh's current securitization processes.

Propaganda has two forms: "unifying" and "alienating." Unifying refers to imagery that promotes ideational solidarity, such as the Iranian use of Shi'a flags and slogans in Syria. Alienating refers to images that aim to engender fear and/or disgust of "the other," such as the use of anti-Saudi cartoons across Tehran's IUVM Pixel platform (Stubbs & Bing, 2018). In this sense, the visual can be offensive and/or defensive. This paper agrees with the logic of van Dijk's (2001) ideological square, that propaganda does one or more of the following:

1) Focus on positive things about us.
2) Focus on negative things about them.
3) Undermine negative things about us.
4) Undermine positive things about them.

The video in question does all four of these things. Yet, the question remains as to why violent propagandized imagery has appeal to mass audiences. Ontological security refers to "the confidence most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the consistency of the surrounding social and material environments" (Giddens, 1991, p. 92). In the post-Arab Spring vacuum, it is understandable why the certainty of ethnoreligious identities, spread across social media, had significant appeal. Narratives of sectarian identity, for instance, provide certainty amongst this chaos. Unifying and alienating propaganda create a collective unity against the pernicious "other." As Mitzen (2006) writes, "a key part of society is its identity and distinctiveness vis-à-vis other societies" (p. 352).

To trace this process of othering and connect security studies to CDA, MacKenzie's (2020) paper was instrumental in demonstrating the idea that "a visual discourse analysis can and should consider patterns across groups of images, as well as the patterns of practice linked to categories of images" (p. 342). This idea is highly influential and will be explored throughout this paper as a key methodological insight, in alignment with J. Wang's (2014) approach to visual analysis.

2 | CDA, MEDIATIZATION, AND THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEXT AND POWER TO VISUAL STUDIES

The spirit of CDA is particularly relevant to this project. Broadly, the visual can be understood in the same way as linguistic discourse, but only to the extent that it can be used as power-laden propaganda, which is ideological and contextually grounded. The visual is a part of discourse. At the same time, it has a specificity, which makes it distinct from *linguistic* forms of discourse. This distinction will be made clear in the section on "the visual as a unique form of propaganda."

CDA focuses on "social problems... especially the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96). ST and CDA both contain

this critical research spirit, as does mediatization (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015), and propaganda studies (Cull et al., 2003; Herrann & Chomsky, 1988).

These approaches are used to adapt CDA's suitability to analysis of Middle Eastern imagery in the era of social media. This paper understands social media as an arrested tool of state propaganda and control. According to mediatization theory, the Middle East has entered the "arrested period," in which "professional media and military institutions have arrested the once-chaotic social media dynamics and more effectively harnessed them for their own ends through new understandings, strategies, and experiments" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015, p. 1320).

Like linguistic discourse, visual propaganda amounts to an "act of controlling and constraining the contributions of the non-powerful participants in society" (Ramanathan & Bee Hoon, 2015, p. 62). It has a manipulative effect, bending the audience to the will of the actor. For instance, Iran's use of Shi'a imagery in Syria has helped to frame the cause as one of religious necessity (Phillips, 2018). Although writing about the capitalist order, Guy Debord's 'the spectacle' is equally relevant when conceptualizing the use of propaganda in the Middle East:

[The] spectacle is the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life. The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes. (Debord, 2014, p. 13)

The use of imagery willfully eradicates any compulsion for the audience to consider context, complexity, or opposing views. In the totalitarian system of KSA, this "domination" of information is all-encompassing. State narratives are carefully dispersed through mass media and social media. Dissenting voices are crushed, most famously demonstrated by the murder of critical Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

3 │ THE VISUAL AS A UNIQUE FORM OF PROPAGANDA

In the contemporary Middle East, the political utility of visual propaganda has been realized. Images of martyrdom, sectarian identity, force, and death are regular tools of state programs of securitization (Schwartz & Gölz, 2021). The Iraq War of 2003 and the Arab Spring of 2011 created ideational vacuums. As traditional bases of state legitimacy were challenged, so too emerged processes of identity entrepreneurism (Matthiesen, 2013). Regime insecurity was accompanied by ontological insecurity at the grass roots level. People have become increasingly fearful of "the other" in a time of regional power contestation. Furthermore, social media created scattered and uncertain personal views on identity and truth. These sociocultural conditions provided ambitious and insecure state actors with the freedom to appeal to grounded, ethnoreligious identities. The politicization of sectarian identity, for instance, had previously been considered a taboo throughout the 20th century, during which narratives of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism reigned supreme (Haddad, 2011; van Dam, 1979). However, following the Arab Spring, Iran and KSA have both sectarianized conflicts, capitalizing on the increasing insecurity and fear of the "other" to legitimize their cynical pursuits for security and power (Mirza et al., 2021).

The word "fear" best characterizes the overall nature of visual propaganda in the NMECW. During periods of conflict, visual propaganda is particularly prevalent and effective (Wintour, 2014, p. 238). In the Middle East, one observable trend is the prevalence of images of death, particularly of dead and dying children (Seo, 2014). As Bouvier and Machin (2018)

write, "it has been observed that conflict images often depict children as part of signifying breakdown" (p. 180). It capitalizes on two key emotions—compassion and fear. It engenders two responses—"those poor children" and "what if that happens to my own children?." In this way, the use of children has a particular visual nature, especially within the context of conflict and insecurity in the NMECW. This example helps to characterize the specific power of the image—"symbolic forms do themselves constitute meaning and cannot be reduced to the spoken or written word alone" (Schlag, 2016, p. 181).

For Lene Hansen (2011), images are *immediate*, because they produce immediate emotional reactions. Physiologically, the human brain processes images 60,000 times faster than text (Pant, 2015). As well as immediate, images are uniquely emotive. For instance, seeing an image of a starving child is more effective than reading an article about a starving child in encouraging charitable donations (Delahunty, 2021). State actors have used the visual to further their programs of securitization on social media platforms; realizing the truth that posts are more popular when accompanied by an image (Li & Xie, 2020; Somerfield et al., 2018).

What Hansen (2011) does not account for is that some images may produce a more immediate emotional response than others. It is necessary to understand the sociocultural context of a particular audience, to understand which types of images are appealing. This paper argues that sophisticated propaganda nexuses in the Middle East have a nuanced understanding of these contexts and frames, as well as a role in constructing them. This makes them effective at securitizing extraordinary measures.

As well as immediacy, Hansen (2011) assigns a specific character to the visual, due to its "circulability and ambiguity" (p. 55). "Circulability" refers to the idea that images spread rapidly across the world and throughout social consciousness. In the era of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, images can spread globally in seconds. Another dynamic, particularly effective for state propagandists, is the reality that human beings are now exposed to graphic images that they have no intention of viewing. Anyone, at any time, could open their social media and see an image that emotionally triggers them. Therefore, "the possibility of seeing—even if one decides not to—is in itself an important condition" (Hansen, 2011, p. 57).

Images also leave an imprint on the mind, in a more intense, severe, and traumatic way than words. Studies of posttraumatic stress disorder have shown this through involuntary repetition of trauma-related flashbacks (M. Wang et al., 2019). This reality has not been convincingly integrated into international relations or security studies to date, which makes it a particularly innovative avenue for this paper. Visual propaganda is more effective than linguistic discourse, due to its profound effect on the human brain.

This paper disagrees with Hansen's over-simplification of the image as "ambiguous." Images may have ambiguities if they are dull, general, and disconnected from sensitive sociocultural contexts. Under these conditions, words may be required to imbue pictures with meaning. However, the idea that "a picture requires a thousand words" (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 193), is not always true. Images are regularly clear and unambiguous. These types of images are regularly visceral and disturbing. Moreover, they are *necessarily* connected to prominent fears, anxieties, cultural knowledge, and cultural truths. The image of Saddam Hussein hanging by his neck in 2006 required no words for the Muslim World to make sense of it.

Rather than the written or spoken word, this paper aims to understand the use of the visual as a tool of securitization, used to legitimize extraordinary measures. This paper's goal is to create a model for visual analysis which can be used to unpack visual propaganda and ultimately to hold state actors to account.

4 | METHOD—A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO VISUAL ANALYSIS

J. Wang (2014) provided the most comprehensive application of the ideals of CDA to visual analysis. Dismayed with previous research into multimodality (Baldry, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), which sought to integrate methodological approaches to analyse 'discourse which involve more than one mode of semiosis' (O'Halloran, 2004), Wang set out to construct a model which could properly analyse the visual, inspired by the core principles of CDA. His critique of previous approaches amounted to the idea that they were "more critical-analysis-oriented than CDA-oriented... it does not sufficiently apply... theoretical paradigms of CDA to visual analysis" (J. Wang, 2014, p. 266).

Innovating around Fairclough's (2003) three-step approach to discourse analysis and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) concept of visual grammar, Wang provided the social sciences with a nuanced critical method for analysis of the visual. This paper contends that this approach can be applied to both the still and moving image. However, the approach needs some updating. As such, a number of innovations are included.

Step 1: Visual design: A close reading of the image's actualities. This involves consideration of the characters, the scene, actions, and so forth.

Step 2: Visual interpretation: Production, distribution, consumption. This looks at how and why the visual is crafted, spread, and received. Fundamentally the question is—"how are ideologies crafted, identities created, and issues securitised across these three processes?."

Step 3: Visual Explanation: This step considers the broader social practices, relevant to the particular image. Contextual awareness is a critically important addition to visual analysis. To fully embrace this spirit, further work is needed in addition to the application of Wang's method.

Innovation A: It is important at this stage to consider the idea of frame, or narrative. Borrowed from semiotic analysis, this concept refers to "a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Awareness of prominent narratives is important, as it allows for better understanding of purpose and meaning.

Innovation B: To be comprehensive, research projects should consider the specificities of these relevant identities, for example, sectarian identity in the Middle East. This requires significant analysis of data and literature, as well as theoretical innovation.

5 | A SYSTEMATIC VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE SAUDI STRIKE FORCE MOVIE

On December 14, 2017, a video appeared on YouTube, the title of which translates from Arabic as "Saudi Strike Force Movie," on a channel called "Saudi Strike Force" (2017). The video runs for a total of 6 min and 6 s. The video depicts a Saudi invasion of Iran, by sea, air, and land. The video is comparable in format and style to that of a video game like Call of Duty.

Step 1: Visual design.

(Scenes, in order of appearance):

1) A black screen: With the following words in both English and Arabic: "To reach the Qibla of the Muslims is a main target for the Iranian regime. We will not wait until the fight is in Saudi Arabia, we will bring the fight to Iran." "MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN AL SAUD."

2) Black screen, with the following words in English, translated at the bottom in Arabic: "SAUDI AID SHIP ON A HUMANITARIAN MISSION. LOCATION: ARABIAN GULF"

3) At sea, a Saudi aid ship appears into frame, embossed with Saudi flags and the words: "KING SALMAN HUMANITARIAN AID & RELIEF CENTRE" (also written on the boat in Arabic). Three Iranian speed boats approach the aid ship, flying Iranian flags. A Saudi warship appears with the words in front of the screen: "The Frigate 'built for speed and maneuverability speed: 14 knots (26 km/h).'" The frigate then fires its cannon, destroying an Iranian speed boat. It then fires its machine gun, piercing bullets through a boat's Iranian flag, before destroying the boat. The frigate then fires missiles at newly approaching Iranian speed boats, which approach at the same time as an Iranian battleship. The frigate fires its missiles again, instantly destroying the Iranian battleship, with a massive explosion visible.

4) At a Saudi command center. Saudi men sit in front of computers, with large central screens in the background on one side, and a central, raised room on the other. The following words are heard:

    Officer 1: "Sir, the frigate just destroyed three Iranian attack boats, attacking one of our ships."

    We see a map of KSA and the Gulf on a computer—with a red flashing light.

    Officer 2: "Sir, sir, we have detected incoming missiles"

    Mohammed bin Salman (MBS): "Prepare the patriots."

5) Now in the desert, there are many Patriot missiles, embossed with Saudi flags. Words: "PATRIOT 'surface-to-air missile with high performance radar system.'" At the same time, there is an audio countdown—"5, 4, 3, 2, 1 LAUNCH." The Patriots fire, destroying incoming Iranian missiles.

6) Command center.

    Officer 1: "Missiles intercepted and destroyed sir."

    MBS: "OK, time for payback. Send in the jets."

7) (All of the following planes are embossed with Saudi flags). First, four typhoons appear, taking off. Words: "Typhoon 'fantastic in maneuverability.'" Then, five F15s are seen flying in formation. Words: "F15 Max Speed: 2656 km/h Range: 5550 km." Finally, one Airborne Warning and Control System is seen flying, locking onto an Iranian plane. Words: "AWACS 'early warning and control able to detect enemies aircrafts.'" The planes destroy several Iranian planes.

8) Command center.

    Officer 1: "Sir, danger has been eliminated."

    MBS: "Get me the Eastern Winds."

9) Desert. Eastern Winds Missiles get ready to fire. Words: "Eastern Winds Missile Up to 12,000 km range.' They fire.

10) Google Earth zooms into the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, with the following words and coordinates on screen "Badir Air Base, (IRGC) 32.6198508 51.7013198." Words: "Arabian Gulf."

11) Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, with an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) emblem on the wall, is destroyed.

12) Five Tornados appear, with Saudi flags. Words: "Tornado 'designed to excel at low-level penetration of enemy defences.'"

13) Google Earth zooms in to an Airbase. Words and coordinates: "Mehrabd Airbase: 35.6931821 51.3121312."

14) Mehrabd Airbase. There are planes lined up on the runway. The airport has pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei on its exterior wall, as well as Iranian flags. The whole base is destroyed.

15) At sea, tanks emblazoned with Saudi flags are being transported by boats. They are then deposited onto a beach. Words: "M1A2 Abrams Speed: 67 km/h." They rapidly speed across the desert.

16) In the air, multiple paratroopers fall, holding onto parachutes with Saudi flags on.

17) Command centre.
   Officer 1: "Your royal highness. Our forces has penetrated the enemy lines."
   Viewers here get their first glimpse of MBS, sat in central command, wearing his ghutra [traditional Saudi headwear].
   Officer 1: "The operation is moving as planned."

18) The viewer is now placed into the perspective of a first-person shooter, holding a Kalashnikov, running through leaves and then desert, surrounded by Saudi troops.

19) Tanks and troops storm an Iranian compound, lowering the Iranian flag in front of it. Once inside, troops run past a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini on the wall. They then kick down a metal door, which is emblazoned with the IRGC symbol. Behind the door is Quds Force Leader, Major General Qasem Soleimani. He is stood in front of pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei. He has his hands up, waving them in a pleading manner, with three Saudi guns aimed at him. He then kneels, cowers, and shakes. A loud bang is heard, and the two pictures dramatically fall off the wall.

20) A Saudi plane is seen flying over Tehran, dropping letters. One letter appears in front of the screen, with a white dove on it, holding an olive branch. It reads: "Peace be Upon You We Are With You" (it also appears in Arabic).

21) In the streets of Tehran, Iranians welcome in the Saudi troops and tanks. They hold Saudi and Iranian flags, as well as pictures of MBS and King Salman. The camera then zooms in towards the Azadi Tower.

22) Now in Mecca, pilgrims are seen circling the Kabbah. An Imam is heard preaching in Arabic, with an English translation visible:

Imam: "And (remember) when Ibrâhîm (Abraham) said:"
Doves are seen flying.
Imam: "O my Lord! Make this city (Makkah) one of peace and security and keep me and my sons away from worshipping idols."

6 | STEP 2: VISUAL INTERPRETATION

6.1 | Production—Video as a direct or indirect tool of Saudi propaganda

It still remains unclear who created the video. Kirkpatrick (2018) managed to get a quote from an unnamed official inside the Saudi embassy in Washington, who "said the prince had nothing to do with the video." Further to the discussion of the role of the media in KSA earlier in the article, this paper argues that even if MBS did not sanction the video, he must have nevertheless approved of it once created. Otherwise, the video would not have remained on

YouTube for the last four years. The video's makers have remained anonymous, and the regime has never publicly condemned the cartoon.

Establishing origination in social media analysis is a difficult task. However, a fairly reliable method is to see whom the postbenefits.

Saudi news media claimed the video was "produced by young people from Saudi Arabia" (Al-Barqawi, 2017). This could well be true. However, no indication has been given of how the video was funded (Paton, 2017), or how its makers possessed such wide-ranging, inside knowledge of Saudi military capabilities. This video was not an amateur production; it is clear whoever was responsible for the video had "significant resources" (Kirkpatrick, 2018). This video is highly beneficial to the Al Saud, highlighting their capacities, and increasing Iranian anxiety. This leads to the reasonable assumption that this video was, at the very least, informed and assisted by members of the ruling elite.

One potential suggestion is that "one of the prince's courtiers might have commissioned the video to flatter him" (Kirkpatrick, 2018). The video depicts MBS as a determined leader, backed by vast military might. The depiction of MBS in the video places him high in a central control room, ordering military action. His voice is comparable to that of a tyrannical villain from an action movie. He wears the traditional Saudi dress, defending his country through might. This is certainly "how he sees himself, or what he would like to be" (Riedel, 2018, as cited in Kirkpatrick, 2018).

This video represents a specific mood within KSA. By late 2017, Riyadh had been engaged in the Yemeni conflict for nearly 3 years. Between the period of 2015–2019, KSA spent at least $265 billion on the conflict (Jalal, 2020). While Iranian involvement was minimal in the early days (Hokayem & Roberts, 2016; Juneau, 2016), constant state-led Saudi fearmongering, guided by a fear of Iranian encirclement, meant that Tehran's involvement became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Phillips, 2018). Iran saw the benefit of increasing its connection with the Houthi movement, as a way of weakening the Saudis. As Hill (2017) put it, Iran's involvement amounted to "trolling the Saudis, for apparently minimal capital investment" (p. 285). Coupled with Iran's success in Syria, this factor helps to explain the desperation in Saudi foreign policy, and its supporting propaganda.

7 | DISTRIBUTION—THE AL SAUD ALLOW THE VIDEO TO FLOURISH

The video was released in both English and Arabic but also provided subtitles in a wide variety of different languages. These included Hebrew, Mandarin, Russian, Turkish, Spanish, and Farsi. This shows that the video was intended for a wide variety of national, regional, and international audiences. English allows the video to be easily consumed by a wide, global, audience. This includes citizens and policymakers in the United States and the United Kingdom, whose weapons systems feature heavily in the video. In 2017, the White House brokered an arms deal between Riyadh and the American company Lockheed Martin, $6bn of which was spent on four warships (Stone, 2018). These feature in the movie.

The careful labeling of these weapons systems with English subtitles adds to the growing feeling that this video aims to demonstrate not only KSA's military might but also to re-emphasize their backing by the West. The Kingdom was buoyed by US President Donald Trump's antipathy towards the Iran nuclear deal (Goldenberg & Karlin, 2017). Seen as a significant gain in the battle for regional hegemony, this video fits into a wider program of

solidifying military ties with the West and raising Iranian anxiety. This also explains why Farsi subtitles were available.

The video was shared widely across Saudi social media and state-backed news media. Some notable articles were found on Saudi news sites such as Al-Riyadh ("Saudi Deterrence," 2017) and Sabq (Al-Barqawi, 2017). Al-Riyadh ("Saudi Deterrence," 2017) claimed the video was a "realistic depiction" and that "[t]he scenes depict reality and the prestige of the Saudi Armed Forces, with its ability to deter foreign ambitions especially Iranian threats" (as cited in The New Arab, 2017). The continuous use of Saudi flags, painted onto weapons systems, conveys a strong nationalist sentiment. The video's impact, distribution, and appraisal by state-backed media sources, confirms it as a tool of Saudi propaganda, and thus part of a broader project of securitization.

8 | CONSUMPTION—WIDE-REACHING, BUT PRIMARILY ARABIC

In total, the various different language versions have amassed 1,719,536 views at the time of writing. The main video dominates by far. The five other videos account for only 68,366 views. The most popular version of the video is the version considered by this paper, which was in English but had Arabic subtitles. At the time of writing it has received 1,651,170 views. The video received 27,000 likes. The account "Saudi Strike Force" was set up for the explicit purpose of sharing this video. There are no posts on the account except for the "Saudi Strike Force Movie" collection (Saudi Strike Force, 2017). As a new account, it would have taken considerable sharing by influential actors to reach such a high view count. This potentially provides further indication of the involvement of interested parties within the corridors of power in Riyadh.

YouTube comments provide a useful way of characterizing a video's reception (Thelwall et al., 2012). The top comment was from someone with a name of Arabic origin. The comment was written in Arabic, and roughly translates as "The end of Safavid Iran is near, God willing" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017). At the time of writing, it has 1000 likes and 119 replies. This allusion to sectarian identity in the comments suggests the video was viewed through a sectarian lens, supporting Haddad's (2020) argument that "[r]ather than a binary, the drivers of sectarian relations come both from above and from below in a circular, mutually reinforcing fashion" (p. 74). Most replies are also in Arabic. This shows that the video's primary audience was the Arab World. In this way, the video represents an example of unifying propaganda, showing the might of the Saudi forces as defenders of the Arab world. Furthermore, the video's engagement demonstrates several of the centrally important frames that permeate throughout this video's development.

9 | STEP 3: VISUAL EXPLANATION

This section discusses the development of the key frames present within the "Saudi Strike Force Movie." These frames were sectarian identity/anti-Iranianism, Islamic nationalism, humanitarianism, and militarism. These frames can be observed across other instances of Saudi propaganda pertaining to the NMECW (Darwich, 2019; Özev, 2017). This shows the coherence of the video's frames with the overarching character of Riyadh's discourse towards Iran, further characterizing it as an instance of Saudi propaganda.

9.1 | Sectarian identity/anti-Iranianism

This paper refers to the politicization of sectarian identity as "sectarianisation," defined as a "process shaped by political actors, operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve political mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers" (Hashemi & Postel, 2017, p. 4). For KSA,

> [T]he cultivation of sectarian differences has served as a means of... operating to ensure their survival, with religious identities mapping onto socio-economic contexts, creating a complex web of forces regulating life. (Mabon, 2020, p. 1)

Sectarian identity has been used as both a unifying, and an alienating, tool of propaganda. This video uses it instrumentally, to unite "us" against "the other" (Darwich, 2019; Gause, 2014).

The first instance of this is demonstrated in Scene 11. The insignia of the IRGC is painted on the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant's outer wall. Known for their creation and sponsorship of Shi'a proxies in the region, the IRGC are here explicitly connected to Iran's nuclear program. This evokes a commonly held view of Iran amongst the Gulf states—that of an expansionist, empire-building Shi'a power, posing a nuclear threat to the Sunni population (Younis, 2021). The image contains a raised fist, gripping an assault rifle. The rifle is contained within a globe. The words in Farsi translate as "Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps"; "and prepare for them what you can by way of power/strength." Together, these factors characterize the image as representative of the global expansion of the Islamic revolution.

This militaristic Shi'a threat is exacerbated by the video's creators, by emblazoning it on a nuclear power plant. Its eventual destruction by Saudi Eastern Winds Missiles shows that Riyadh can defend the Sunni world. It is hardly surprising the top YouTube comment read "The end of Safavid Iran is near, God willing" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017). The Safavid Empire was a vast Shi'a Empire that brutally persecuted Sunni Muslims between 1501 and 1736.

Scene 19 is perhaps the best example of alienating sectarianization. Kicking down a door emblazoned with the IRGC symbol, the Saudi forces find a cowering Soleimani. As the leader of the Quds Force, the foreign arm of the IRGC, no figure has been regarded as more influential in the development of Iran's Shi'a proxies (Vatanka, 2018). The two ayatollahs' pictures are then blasted off the walls. This scene depicts the triumph of KSA over the heart of Iranian militant sectarianism.

9.2 | Islamic nationalism

As Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques, Riyadh has a long tradition of using Islam as a source of national legitimacy (Quilliam & Kamel, 2003). This form of nationalism is characterized as making "religion the basis for the nation's collective identity and the source of its ultimate value and purpose on this earth" (Soper & Fetzer, 2018, p. 7). Scene 1 opens with MBS's quote, which reads "[T]o reach the Qibla of the Muslims is a main target for the Iranian regime. We will not wait until the fight is in Saudi Arabia, we will bring the fight to Iran" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017). Scene 22 closes the video with the image of the Qibla at peace, as a result of the destruction of the Islamic Republic. This image frames the entire video, evoking the idea that Iran represents a threat to the sanctity of Islam itself.

Scenes 20 and 21 show the Iranian people welcoming Saudi forces into Tehran, holding Saudi flags and pictures of MBS and King Salman. The Al Saud are here clearly represented as the antidote to the Islamic Republic, and as rightful rulers of the Islamic world. In Scene 22, the character of the Imam evokes Ibrâhîm, crying "O my Lord! Make this city (Makkah) one of peace and security and keep me and my sons away from worshipping idols" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017). This quote, compounded by the image of the peaceful doves flying above Mecca, aptly illustrates this representation of the Saudi savior.

9.3 | Humanitarianism

Approximately 250,000 people have died since the Saudis launched their assault on Yemen in 2015 (Kimball & Jumaan, 2020). Yet, in Scenes 2 and 3, a Saudi aid ship is shown moving towards Yemen, with the words "KING SALMAN HUMANITARIAN RELIEF CENTRE" (Saudi Strike Force, 2017) on its side. Here, King Salman is portrayed as the "good guy." This is a favored tactic of Riyadh, who have frequently used humanitarian aid as a tool of securitization (Özev, 2017). No mention is made of their blockade of Yemeni ports, which leading human rights organizations agree has been instrumental in creating the Yemen famine (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Médecins Sans Frontiers, 2020). Eighty percent of the country is now dependent on humanitarian aid (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Instead of claiming responsibility for this, the spread of this video has helped to level the blame at Iran. Scene 3 shows Iranian ships attempting to directly stop Saudi efforts to deliver aid, constructing them as the enemies of humanity.

9.4 | Militarism

The majority of scenes are detailed demonstrations of Saudi weapons, and their destructive capabilities. The creator is keen to include weapons from the United Kingdom, United States, and Chinese companies, showing the extent of Riyadh's global network. For instance, Scene 7 contains US-made F15s, UK-made Typhoons, and a Chinese AWACS.

After years of sanctions, Iranian capabilities are far less advanced. Whoever made this video was keen to reiterate this point and increase Iranian anxieties. Putting Saudi flags on the weapons systems further added to this construction of Saudi superiority.

10 | CONCLUSION

This paper has constructed a method for the analysis of visual propaganda, which can be applied to a wide range of Middle Eastern case studies. It has showed its inner workings, providing a step-by-step depiction of the thought-process of the researcher. The hope is that this will influence much-needed research development in the field of visual analysis. Images have profound symbolic resonance in the Middle East, collating a number of different identities to function as tools of state-backed propaganda. Their securitizing impact is best characterized by Debord's (2014) words, "When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings—dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behaviour" (p. 11).

Their capacity to evoke emotional responses is unparalleled, making them a particularly rapid, immediate form of propaganda. The "Saudi Strike Force Movie" is a strong example of this. Teachings from CDA have helped to characterise visual propaganda as contextually based and power-laden. This video emerged during a period of unprecedented Saudi militarism. Having been undermined in Syria and Yemen, the Kingdom had seen rapid losses to their position in the regional balance of power. Buoyed by Trump's condemnation of the Joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA), and sizable international arms deals, this video forms a part of a wider project of political opportunism, to increase Iranian insecurity through emphasizing Saudi military power.

Although the Al Saud deny a direct role in its production, their support for the video is visible through its spread across Saudi news media. The media constitute a key part of the Saudi regime's nexus of propaganda. Reaching over 1.6 million views, the Arabic/English version of the video has had a significant reach. Sectarian and anti-Iranian comments create a picture of solidarity, stretching across the Arab world.

Visually, images appealed to four key frames: sectarian identity, Islamic nationalism, humanitarianism, and militarism. Weapons systems adorned with Saudi flags were seen destroying nuclear compounds and air bases adorned with IRGC symbols and pictures of the ayatollahs. Soleimani, the mastermind of Iran's sectarian proxy policy, is seen cowering in front of pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei. Together, these vivid depictions construct the idea of the Saudi good versus the Iranian evil. Appeals to Islamic legitimacy establish King Salman as the rightful Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, portraying Khamenei as an "idol." Riyadh's justness is extended, showing a humanitarian aid ship heading for Yemen. King Salman's name appears on its side. The video has the effect of detracting from Saudi atrocities in Yemen; and further, levelling the blame for the humanitarian crisis at Iran.

Together, through visual interpretation and explanation, this video can be reliably characterized as a tool of propaganda, which was allowed to flourish by the Saudi regime. It depicts MBS as a military strongman who could easily triumph over the Islamic Republic and its "cowardly" leaders. Visual analysis across social media provides compelling insight into the nature of sectarianization and propaganda in the NMECW.

To further develop this picture, future research could benefit from comparative case studies of Iranian and Saudi visual propaganda. It could also compare instances of propaganda that relate to different conflicts, such as a comparison of Syria and Yemen. Lastly, future research could benefit from the application of a fourth step to this systematic approach to visual analysis: a reflective task, devised by this paper.

11 | STEP 4

11.1 | Omission

What is not present? After collecting the raw data, it is equally important to consider what has not been included (Abdulmajid, 2019, p. 29). To illustrate the importance of this point, an image of an Irish child jumping up in front of a wall that read "Time for Peace" was circulated during The Troubles in 1994 (Goldsmith, 2017). The image was cropped artificially. The wall actually read: "Time for Peace: Time to Go." Meaning here was completely changed from one of anti-English sentiment; to one of tolerance and peace.

11.2 | The commutation test

[B]y substituting various elements in your mind's eye… it is possible to build a more nuanced understanding of each to the overall meaning of the image and its dependence upon wider cultural codes and myths (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 213).

This is a particularly useful tool for scholars trying to understand the tactical inclusion or exclusion of figures, objects, or characters, by actors, and their connection to dominant frames and social practices. This paper's method for visual analysis should help to guide these future research projects.

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