Satire and protest: the Middle East through Egyptian cartoons

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Introduction

This paper aims at examining how Egyptian popular culture shapes perception of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict through the widespread medium of political cartoons. The paper examines cartoons published in Egyptian newspapers after the American president, Donald Trump, announced in 2017 that the USA move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

Origins of Cartoons in Egypt and the Western Influence

In his book entitled, “A History of Press Drawings in Egypt”, Nasser Iraq (2002) traces the emergence of figurative illustrations in Egyptian newspapers through a study of the history of editorial drawings in Egypt. The study explains that these drawings “sneaked” into the Egyptian press in mimicry of the French occupation papers. It was the standard practice for French newspapers to feature decorative drawings on the front page to embody national symbols. This French practice appeared in the first Egyptian newspaper, Al Waka’ie Al Misreya (Egyptian Occurrences), which featured Egyptian symbols. Iraq (2002) examines other features of cultural hybridity and mimicry that contributed to the development of editorial cartoon production in Egypt. The author mentions numerous examples of cartoons being “imported” from European papers and re-published in the Egyptian satirical paper, Al Lata’ef Al Mosawara (Pictorial Delights), during World War I. While the cartoon captions were translated into Arabic, neither were any changes made to the drawings nor any reference made to Egyptian issues.

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1 The most famous of these representations was that of a female form holding a mace in one hand and a pike in the other to symbolize the French Revolution (Iraq, 2002).

2 On the 3rd of December 1828, the first issue of Al Waka’ie Al Misreya appeared with a drawing of an Egyptian cotton tree as its headline banner. Iraq (2002) states that the drawings kept changing but retained an Egyptian theme, from pyramids to palm trees.
Framework for this study

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

Q1: How was President Trump’s decision to declare Jerusalem as Israel’s capital framed in political cartoons published in Egyptian newspapers?

Q2: Who were the actors the cartoons featured and how were they visually portrayed?
Methodology

A quantitative content analysis was conducted in this study, as an empirical method to examine how Egyptian political cartoons addressed Donald Trump’s 2017 announcement of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital. The study focuses on cartoons published within one month of Trump’s announcement between 6th December 2017 and 6th January 2018. The unit of analysis of this study was the cartoon.

Samples were collected from the three main state-run newspapers in Egypt, Al Ahram, Al Akhbar and Al Gomhuria, from the archives of The American University in Cairo library and The Egyptian National Library in Cairo. The sample gathered included cartoons published from the day the intifada erupted (28th September 2000) to a month later and from the day President Trump made his announcement (6th of December 2017) to a month later.

A pilot study was conducted to collect preliminary data on the available cartoons. In addition, a random sample of the cartoons was examined with the purpose of developing a coding scheme and to test its feasibility.

Using a purposive sample 73 cartoons were collected. According to Davies and Mosdell (2006), a purposive sample is a non-probability sampling scheme, since the choice of the sample is done for a specific reason. Hence, cartoons that directly targeted or referred to the topic of this study either through visual or rhetorical techniques were included for testing.

Full details of the coding employed can be found in Appendix 1.
Cartoon Topics

The topics and subject matter, which the cartoons focused on, varied between those published in state owned newspapers: Al Ahram and Al Akhbar/Akhbar Al Youm and those published in the examined private newspaper, Al Masry Al Youm.

As graph (1) shows, for Al Ahram, the most recurring main topic was conflict/security matters (n=6), followed by regional perspective (n=3) and international perspective (n=3). For AlAkhbar/Akhbar AlYoum diplomacy came first (n=3), followed by conflict/security (n=2), international (n=2) and finally regional (n=1). For the private owned AlMasry AlYoum, the most dominant topic the cartoons tackled was diplomacy (n=15), followed by domestic (n=13), regional (n=10), conflict/security (n=5) and finally international.

Conflict/Security

In Al Ahram, cartoons with conflict/security subject matter mainly focused on the threat of violence (n=2) and the status of Jerusalem/Palestine (n=2), then Israeli aggression (n= 1). In Al Akhbar, the two cartoons featuring a conflict/security subject matter focused on the threat of violence. In Al Masry Al Youm, cartoons having conflict as its main topic mainly focused on
portraying Palestinians as freedom fighters (n=3), Israeli aggression (n=1) and threat of violence (n=1).

**Diplomacy**

As for diplomacy, the cartoons published in the examined newspapers mainly focused on the failure of the peace process; Al Ahram (n=2), AlAkhbar/Akhbar AlYoum (n=2) and Al Masry AlYoum (n=4). The cartoons also highlighted the theme of America threatening those who rejected the announcement with sanctions; Al Ahram (n=1) and Al Masry AlYoum (n=4). Only two cartoons of Al Masry AlYoum and one of AlAkhbar/Akhbar AlYoum focused on American-Israel relations.

**Domestic Perspective**

Cartoons published in state owned newspapers did not tackle the Egyptian domestic position towards the conflict. Only cartoons of the privately owned Al Masry AlYoum had this subject matter. These cartoons mainly focused on the themes of the Egyptian peoples’ hypocrisy towards the conflict (n = 3), Egyptians passiveness/ineffectiveness (n=2), Egyptian officials’ hypocrisy (n=3), Egyptian officials’ cowardice (n=2) and Egyptian people supporting Palestinians’ rights (n=1). The cartoons published in Al Masry Alyoum were the only ones to tackle domestic issues with the focus on the Egyptian – American relations, especially from the context of the American financial aid that Egypt receives, portraying the later as a follower.

**Regional Perspective**

The regional perspective of other countries on the issue was minimally present in state owned newspaper. For Al Ahram, cartoons under this subject matter focused on Arab – American relations (n = 1), Arab citizens passiveness (n = 1), Arab citizens hypocrisy (n = 1). In Al Akhbar, there was only one cartoon discussing the regional perspective with a focus on Arab officials hypocrisy. However, in Al Masry Alyoum cartoons the focus was on Arab – American relations (n = 4), followed by Arab officials cowardice (n = 3) and Arab citizens passiveness (n = 3).
International Viewpoint

For cartoons that had the international perspective as their subject matter, in Al Ahram (n = 3) and Al Masry AlYoum (n = 1) the main focus was the UN being supportive of Palestinians. However, Al Akhbar cartoons were mainly projecting the UN being powerless (n = 1) and the Security Council being against Palestinian rights (n = 1).

Other topics

In addition to the topics included in the coding scheme, others emerged during the analysis.

Al Masry AlYoum had several cartoons highlighting that the relationship between Arab authorities and Americans were mainly founded on money; either Arab officials paying Americans to help them stay in control, or Americans providing financial aid for Arab nations to silence them.

In a cartoon published in Al Masry AlYoum (Fig. 2), Uncle Sam, representing America, is walking with an Israeli soldier, who is asking him, “What do you add in financial aid? In a week they’ll forgot about moving the embassy to Jerusalem.”
Another topic, which Al Masry Alyoum highlighted, was the role of media in Egypt in diverting people from the news concerning the Palestinian conflict. Fig (3) shows a cartoon featuring a father and son watching television with a huge clown coming out of it saying “We had a small segment about the Trump announcement, now back to the stories about Shakiq (former prime minister) and Adli (home office secretary under Mubarak regime.” The cartoonists intended to use a framing device encompassing playing with the sizes of the characters within the panel, in order to demonstrate the idea that the media, represented as the clown, is domineering.

![Fig. (3)](image)

**Iconography**

Al Masry Alyoum cartoons had the highest frequency of using iconography (n= 20) attempting to convey certain messages, in comparison to Al Ahram (n = 10) and Al Akhbar (n = 8). Across the examined sample, the most used iconography was the Star of David (n=6), followed by weapons/dangerous devices (n=4), doves and peace related icons (n = 3), stones and darts (n=2).

The choice of icons utilized in the examined cartoons did not differ from the ones featured in previous literature that examined the treatment of the Arab Israeli conflict in cartoons. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the Star of David is mainly used to identify Israel as a state, Israeli officials and soldiers. Despite being a religious symbol of Judaism, it’s widely used in Egypt to refer to Zionists. It’s very rare for Egyptians to differentiate Judaism, as a religion, from Zionism. Fig (4), shows a cartoon that was published in Al Ahram, with America represented as Uncle Sam feeding Palestinians to a hungry crocodile with the Star of David, identifying Israeli to the reader.
**Cartoon Characters**

**Dominant Actors**

The most recurring dominant actor in the tested sample was the American President Donald Trump in both state owned and private newspapers (n=15), followed by Egyptian citizens (n = 8), the figure of Uncle Sam (n = 4), Benjamin Netanyahu (n=3), Arab officials (n=3), Arab citizens (n = 3), Egyptian officials (n = 3), Israeli soldiers (n = 2), and Palestinian children (n=1).
Secondary Actors

The secondary actor in the tested sample with the most appearances was Donald Trump (n=10), followed by Egyptian citizens (n=7), then planet earth (3) and Benjamin Netanyahu (n=1). It was noticed that the majority of times when Trump was featured, as a secondary character, Netanyahu was the dominant character. This resonates with the popular understanding in Egypt that America is not only a close ally of Israel, but it is the latter that dominates American politics.

Fig. (6) shows a cartoon that was published in Al Masry Al Youm representing how the power balance between America and Israel is seen. Netanyahu is the dominant actor, with a significantly larger size within the drawn panel, while Trump is the secondary actor sitting on his nose and asking if Netanyahu is satisfied. The visual image of Netanyahu holds different connotations, among which is being featured as Pinocchio, so alluding that he is a liar. In addition, the character drawing is touching on the stereotypical representations of Jews in general, as his nose was the main exaggerated feature.
Character portrayals

*Donald Trump*

Trump, as a dominant character, was either represented through a visual image, or personified into another being. In the three newspapers, when cartoonists used visual images to portray the American president, portrayals including a barbarian, aggressor, sadist, or anti-peace were recurring. Fig (7) shows a cartoon was published in Akhbar ALYoum featuring Trump, as an aggressor. He was featured with clothes and primitive stick weapon characteristic of thugs in Egypt. The cartoonist even used a catchphrase from the drug dealer character in the Egyptian movie ‘Al Jazeera’ (The Island), saying, “From today there is no government (law), I am the government (law).”

![Fig (7)](image)

In most of the cartoons featuring Trump via a visual image, the framing technique of exaggerating physiological features was used. Trump’s hair was the main exaggerated feature to the extent that some cartoonist drew Trump with a blank face without any features to be recognized only through the exaggerated hair.

When the personification technique was used to portray Trump, he was mainly projected as a beast. Yet, personifying him, as a child playing with planet Earth, as a ball, recurred in cartoons in three newspapers. An example, from Al Masry Al Youm, is shown in Fig. (8).
Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli soldiers made occasional appearances as dominant actors. They were only represented via visual images with their portrayals varying from sadists to aggressors. As previously mentioned, the only occasions when Trump, or America (represented as Uncle Sam) were portrayed as secondary actors was when Benjamin Netanyahu, or other Israeli figures, were featured in the same frame.

These representations reinforced the cartoonists’ opinion (and popular opinion in Egypt) of America is being led by Israel. Fig (9) shows a cartoon that was published in Al Ahram, showing Netanyahu, as a dominant actor, sitting on injured/dead Palestinians, while Uncle Sam announces Israel’s victory, while holding the Star of David with the Israeli Prime Minister.
The framing device of exaggerating physiological figures was widely used when portraying Israelis. The main exaggerated feature was the nose.

Despite Jews forming a considerable part of the Egyptian community, before the establishment of Israel in 1948, old Egyptian comedy films usually featured Jewish characters with long noses, talking in a certain sarcastic way and trying to get financial benefits from their ‘inner circles’.
**UN and Security Council**

The United Nations was the second most represented dominant actor in the sample. In cartoons published in both state-owned and private newspapers, it was only portrayed via symbolic representation. As discussed in the literature review, symbolic representation is mainly used to generalize a certain opinion towards an entity.

Cartoons published both Al Ahram and Al Masry AlYoum projected the UN in a positive manner, since it rejected Trump’s announcement. However, cartoons in Akhbar AlYoum presented the UN in a negative tone and used symbolic representation to hold the organization, as a whole, accountable for the consequence of Trump’s announcement. AlYoum also was the only newspaper publishing cartoons criticizing the Security Council. Fig (10) shows the Security Council, as an American prostitute, in her underwear.

![Fig. (10)](image)

**America**

In the tested sample America was mainly symbolically represented using various related icons, such as the Statue of Liberty and the American flag. In other occasions, the visual image of Uncle Sam appeared to represent America as well.
As it appears from the previously discussed cartoons, Uncle Sam was mainly portrayed either as an aggressor, a sadist or a cunning person resembling the image of America in Egyptian popular culture. Despite the fact that Egypt is an American political ally and receives military funds from Washington, the narrative the Egyptian state media has been promoting is that America is the enemy always conspiring against their country.

This was clear in the various cartoons featuring America, for example Fig (11). The cartoon that was published in Al Ahram symbolically representing America, as a an owl killing Palestine, represented as a dove, with the caption saying “Nothing louder than owls.” Unlike in western cultures, where owls symbolize wisdom, in the eastern narrative owls represent bad luck, evil and death.

![Fig (11)](image)

**Egyptian citizens and officials**

Cartoons featuring only Egyptian citizens were only published in Al Masry Alyoum. Their portrayals varied between making them passive, disoriented people and hypocrites.

The hypocrisy frame was mainly stressed through depicting the issue of a proposed boycott of American goods, then not being able to fulfill this. On many occasions a boycott of goods would be the first popular reaction towards the conflict among the Egyptian community. Fig. 12 shows a journalist working at his study on a piece calling for a boycott of American goods, while he is asking his family to order MacDonald’s for him.
Again only cartoons in Al Masry AlYoum featured Egyptian officials’ reactions towards the issue. Cartoonists refrained from visualizing a particular identifiable official, since having well identified figures of officials in cartoons stirs censorship problems to the extent of cartoonists’ imprisonment, as happened under President Mubarak. Yet, cartoonists used subtle keywords and visual themes to distinguish the official figures from others within the drawing panel. Officials were always drawn in suits and with exaggerated bellies and torsos, unlike the ordinary citizens who appeared to be skinny, a reflection of their poverty. Fig 13 shows a cartoon of an official at the dentist, complaining of his jaw aching from all the ‘phony’ appeals he is issuing against Trump’s announcement. For years, Egyptian officials have been mocked within the popular culture for not taking any action to help Palestinians, beyond expressing their rejection of the situation.

**Arab citizens and officials**

Both Arab officials and citizens were portrayed as passive.
In his book Danjoux (2012) stated that Palestinian cartoons discussing the conflict shy away from identifying any Arab leaders or officials. Cartoons only alluded visually or rhetorically to Arab leaders without naming any. Danjoux (2012) linked this to censorship and restraints on Palestinian cartoonists.

The same concept recurred with the current research sample. There were no fully identified figures of Arab leaders in any of the cartoons published in state owned newspapers. As Danjoux (2012) found in his results, cartoonists mostly employed stereotypical portrayals of Arab leaders with fat bodies. This was similar to how Egyptian cartoonists portrayed Arab leaders and officials. However, in the examined sample of this study, Al Masry Al Youm did visually identify the Qatari Amir and President Erdogan. In the cartoons (n=2) Erdogan was portrayed with a visual image and framed mainly as a hypocrite; a cunning person allied with Israel behind closed doors, whilst having fake sympathy with the Palestinian cause in public Fig (14). These cartoons resonate with the current Egyptian foreign policy that sees Turkey and Qatar as foes.

This brings back into focus questions of to what extent cartoons are free to ridicule other leaders or if it’s only permitted to draw certain figures that are not favourites of the current regime?

Al Akhbar published a cartoon of the Qatari Emir Fig 15, where he was featured as a customer service agent at an Israeli veterans center, with a caption saying that he donated huge amounts of money to that entity. In this specific cartoon, the framing technique known as “exemplar”, was used.

Exemplar is the cartoonist tool used to draw similarities between two characters, by featuring both within the drawing panel. In this case, the other character was the late Israeli Prime Minister David Ben – Gurion, with the Emir presented as his servant. As many readers would not be able to identify Ben – Gurion, the cartoonists added his name. However, Ben – Gurion was drawn within the stereotypical context of an Israeli character that appeared throughout the sample, with exaggerated nose and the kippah. Even if the name was not included, a reader would identify the figure as Israeli. Also, the cartoon adds to the narrative of Egyptian state media, that asserts Qatar is a supporter of Israel, without any discussion of Egyptian Israeli relations.
Overall, examining how cartoons represented Arab officials, Al Masry Alyoumwas was the most harsh. In the cartoon (Fig 16), an unidentified Arab official is sitting with his Egyptian counterpart, while saying on the phone, “Washington, can we appeal the Jerusalem related decision?”
The representations of Arab citizens did not differ much from that of Egyptians. The stereotypical representations of fat figures in traditional gulf attire recurred and Arab citizens were mainly represented as weak and phony. Fig 17 shows a cartoon from Al Ahram featuring an Arab pretending to be tired while lifting weights, when he is just moving a light stick. The cartoon carries the message that Arabs are portraying an image of helping Palestinians, while doing nothing. Fig (18) shows another cartoon from Al Ahram, showing an old armed Arab riding a tortoise while chanting, “We will free Jerusalem”. The cartoon ridicules the ever present meme that whenever any tension erupts in the Palestinian territories Arabs rise up, but nothing happens.
Appendix 1 Coding sheet details

The first 3 questions of the coding sheet were related to general variables with the purpose of collecting generic information about the examined cartoon. The first question asks for the serial number given to the cartoon for identification. The second and third questions ask about the newspaper, where the cartoon was published and its ownership type.

The fourth question identifies the broader subject matter of the cartoon. The questions from 5 to 9 examined the main issues of focus of the cartoon, under the previously discussed categories.

Another set of questions aimed to identify the stylistic and rhetorical devices the cartoonists used in conveying messages and building frames. Questions 10 explore whether the cartoonist used iconography to frame a message. The following question asks specifically about the type of visual icon used in the cartoon. Some of these options occur in the literature related to cartoons and visual framing of the Palestinian Israeli conflict, while others were developed during the pilot study. Question 12 examines what kind of rhetorical disposition devices the cartoonist used.

Question 13 identified who is the dominant/main actor within the cartoon. While some cartoons included in the sample featured more one character it would have been a statistical challenge to code for all of them. Hence, two categories of actors were created; (1) a dominant actor that had the main role in the cartoon narrative and/or appeared bigger in size in relation to other actors, (2) and a secondary one in relation to either the role played or/and its drawn size. Hence, the following set of questions were repeated, once for the primary actor and then the secondary actor.

The 14th question examined the way the primary actor was portrayed, either through personification, symbolic representation, or just a visual image.
Question 15 examined, in case the dominant actor was portrayed via personification or symbolic representation, how it was represented. Various options, were developed during the pilot study. Question 16 explored how the dominant actor was presented. Question 17 asked if the cartoonists exaggerated certain features of their subject and what these features were.

Questions 18 to 22 explored the same aspects as the ones from 14 to 17, but for the secondary actor. Question 23 focused on whether a certain depiction was utilized in the cartoon to convey its message. Question 24 asked exactly about the nature of the settings used. Various options of places and settings were developed during the pilot study.

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