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Middle East Trends: A Media View



Nadia Turki is a London-based Arab journalist, biographer and poet. From 2010 to 2015 Nadia was the Senior Editor in the Political Section of Alsharq Al Aswat (Middle East) and has interviewed many senior Arab and international politicians and businessmen. She is the biographer of M. Cherif Bassiouni, a leading figure in human rights and international law. Nadia regularly hosts and participates in BBC Arabic programmes including “7 Days”, “Open Agenda” and “Talk Time”. Her poetry includes the book “The Vision” and for many years she wrote a daily column in the “Al-Arab” newspaper titled “Reflections of a Woman”. In 2015 Nadia founded and serves as President of the International Academy of Media and Diplomacy (IAMD).



James Watt CVO served extensively in the Middle East, including most recently as British Ambassador to Egypt (2011-14), Jordan (2006-11) and Lebanon (2003-6). His 37-year diplomatic career covered many of the major political and security questions of the day, providing wide experience also of economic, business and development issues.

Q1 Nadia, we’re delighted that you have joined us at the Ambassador Partnership. You bring deep experience of analysing political developments in the Middle East, and a remarkable network of senior contacts. Being based all these years in London, you have been able to compare Arab opinion with Western media reporting. What are the main features of the two different viewpoints?

A1 Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

As for the view of the Arabs of Western media, it divides into two major areas of opinion. The first relates to government and the second to people. Most governments in the Middle East feel Western media reporting is unbalanced. They regard these reports as presenting an incomplete and often mistaken view of the Middle East. They also feel these reports make a bad impression not only on Westerners but also on their own people who follow Western media. For example, Western criticism of human rights and women’s rights obscures huge progress made in these areas in recent years in most Arab countries, including the raising of the position of women in Arab society. These are issues the western press and media rarely represent. This is not to say that bad things don’t happen, as in any society. Simply, that a good journalist looks for both sides of the story and that simply isn’t happening.

Q2 This is a time of conflict in some Arab countries, sadly, and of economic challenges in others. The news tends to highlight the negatives. Can you run us through some examples of what the Western media are missing? And of what Arab media are not saying?

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A2 Yes, sadly it is very true that all the Middle East is going through a very critical time. Local conflicts are escalating into wars, specifically related to the war on terrorism or provoked by interethnic disputes. There is also an economic crisis that is affecting even countries not involved in these disputes. The reduced price of crude oil is putting pressure on Middle East economies dependent on exports of crude. This sometimes explodes into violence, as we have seen in Iraq, Syria, Libya and other territories.

The media scene itself has expanded out of all recognition with the demands of the 24-hour news cycle leading to not just a massive explosion of print, broadcast and online media but the emergence of social media via the blogosphere, Facebook and other outlets.

Not a day goes by without a new story about an attack or an atrocity somewhere in the Middle East. Never forget the journalistic axiom: "If it bleeds it leads." However, what gets ignored is the much longer term trend towards re-establishment of order and social progress. There are many stories of refugees fleeing their homes, but relatively few about them coming back and rebuilding. Where are the stories about King Abdullah's reforms in Saudi Arabia to strengthen the rights and position of women in Arab society? Where are the stories about Middle Easterners supporting each other and working closely with aid agencies to restore balance?

Even at the macro level there is little reflection on the global and historical trends that have led to much of what is taking place in the Middle East. In short, too much short term reaction, too little medium and long term reflection on causes and outcomes. Also ignored is the progress of the huge economic co-operation between western companies and Middle Eastern organisations that are benefiting westerners as much as the Middle East.

This short sighted attitude by too many journalists and reporters encourages Islamophobia. What we need crucially is balance.

Unfortunately, Middle Eastern media are not much help either. Often working to local political agendas, they ignore the huge changes occurring in the region and avoid debate about what the near future might look like. As a result, both local and international audiences risk being misled.

Q3 Do you see a way to defusing the current diplomatic confrontation with Qatar? How worried should firms be with contracts or investments there?

A3 The Qataris are being bullish about the current embargo imposed by a coalition of GCC states. As you will remember, a GCC coalition led by Saudi Arabia accused Qatar of sponsoring terrorism in the region. The GCC imposed a blockade and a mediation process introduced by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Kuwait failed. The GCC coalition of Saudi, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain imposed 13 conditions, acceptance of which would raise the diplomatic and economic blockade, but this was rejected by Qatar. The 13 conditions were then transmuted into 6 principles but the standoff continues. As Philip Hammond, former British Foreign Secretary and now Chancellor of the Exchequer, said: "Our job is to keep people communicating and talking to each other."

The Qataris counter accusations of sponsorship of terrorism by saying that different interests throughout the region, including Saudi, are sponsoring terrorism, but not at state level. They are also relying on their wealth (the highest per capita GDP in the Middle East) to see them through. Nevertheless, there are adjustments to be made.

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Hopefully temporary closure of land frontiers will be counter-balanced by increased imports and exports via sea routes and by air. Costs will undoubtedly increase but I don't think firms with interests in Qatar should be worried long term. The danger might be retaliation for support of investment in Qatar by revocation of agreements with other GCC coalition partners. But I think economic realities will prevail. And remember that every crisis opens up new opportunities for both international business and political involvement. All parties are aware of the danger of the situation escalating into armed conflict or isolated acts of violence and a relatively cautious approach is in order.

Q4 Things seem to be moving in Libya, finally, towards a workable agreement on national government. What needs to happen there for this to become a reality?

A4 Libya is a chess board with a number of key players: the Government of National Unity led by Serraj, the army led by General Haftar and 200 militia groups, particularly those from Misrata. In Libya, you have to look at politics at three levels: national, regional and tribal. Although the country is rich in oil and gas resources and is exporting one billion barrels a day, internal cohesion is not assured and public utilities and facilities, such a transport, are still unavailable or unreliable. As Sir Vincent Fean, former Ambassador to Libya, points out in his July 2017 AP Insight 'Libya Matters': "Libyans are tired after four years of political division, economic turmoil, too many guns and crime on their streets. ...They want a government that works: one law, one gun. They will back a government that delivers security and basic services – ATM machines with cash in them, medicines in the pharmacies, food in the shops, electricity 24/7. The rest will follow."

Indications are that the militias, while still disruptive, are discredited and power rests on negotiations between the army leader Field Marshal Haftar and the Government Prime Minister Serraj. However, Libya is still affected by internal instability and external influences both from the Middle East and Russia (Rosneft has a 30% stake in Libyan oil). What is needed is consensus on internal stability and external non-interference. As Sir Vincent goes on to say: "The good news is that the UN Secretary General has just appointed an effective Arab negotiator as his Special Representative to Libya – Lebanese former Minister Ghassan Salame. He has the required skills to bring the right Libyans together. He will need space and time and strong international support". The media role, so important at this stage, is to influence the public mind set and help them to understand what is needed to bring security to their country.

Q5 Businesses and the oil and gas market seem to be taking in their stride the heightened tone of antagonism between some Arab States and Iran, and the recent warnings from Israel about the Iranian military presence in Syria. Is this the right call? What might happen to change it?

A5 We cannot predict at the moment if the recent warnings about the Iranian military presence in Syria from Israel is the right call or not, because what's happening mainly in Syria and the involvement of many countries and groups in this situation make it so complicated to determine what is right or wrong. Moving onto what might happen to change it, that's not easy to say, especially now with all the changes that are happening in the region and in the world.

The 'elephant in the room', present at all negotiations, is Iran. Iran has pursued the interests of Shiite majorities and minorities in the MENA region through diplomatic activity and the sponsorship of an active militia,

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Hizbollah, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Following the lifting of sanction by the US, Iran is going to become more influential not less. And in due course it will have to be seen as an active player in any international peace negotiation in the region.

Q6 The demographics of the region - in the North African countries, for example - pose a challenge to those economies which are adapting only slowly to modern global conditions. All agree that education is the long-term key to a solution. But is educational reform happening?

A6 Unfortunately in most North African countries we are not seeing any educational reforms happening. Personally I believe in the saying: “What you put in the heads of your children today is the future of your nation.” And that’s what makes me very concerned about education in the Arab world and particularly North Africa, where education is still very old fashioned, although they are starting to introduce technology and the English language from an early stage. However, in most of those countries, we still can’t see a clear strategy to improve the educational system.

Q7 To finish - your advice to Arab policy-makers? And to Western ones?

A7 I don’t believe that I am the right person from my position to provide advice to the Arab policy makers. But from my past experiences, which involved working closely with the Arab world from the UK, I noticed a lack of clear policies or plans either for short or long term in most governmental bodies and organisations. In most situations decisions were reactive rather than proactive. Personally I think this not wise and cannot provide a solid long term lasting future to a country. So I think the time has come for Arab policy makers to re-think what they are doing, and explore a new way of dealing with these crises and think of more long term strategies that demand consistency.

One country doing this is Oman, which in recent years has tried to diversify its economy, reduce dependence on oil and gas exports and train and develop Omanis to run and work in business and industry rather than rely on expatriates. This is a model for what could be done elsewhere and is especially relevant to the oil and gas giants like Saudi Arabia.

What we saw in the past was ‘short breath’ decisions leading nowhere. As far as the West is concerned, I believe that they need to support their alliances in the Arab world not only by selling them cars, weapons and technology but also to convince them how crucial it is for them to learn from the West how to provide education, health, human rights and social services.

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