

Special Section: Essays on Nationalism, Conflict and Media

Cross-border Collaboration as Modus Operandi for Arab Public Interest Journalism

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Abstract: Despite laws, ownership structures and intimidation of media practitioners in Arab countries that render independent reporting extremely risky, digital media initiatives have sprung up across the region aimed at providing crucial insights into matters of public interest that are suppressed by state-controlled media. Blocked online and harassed offline by government forces, these initiatives survive against the odds, often working with cross-border support networks. Reflecting a range of innovative transnational interactions, such solidarity networks emerge when media practitioners pursue national concerns through regional and global alliances. This essay reviews noteworthy features of these interactions in light of an existing tradition of intra-regional cross-border exchange facilitated through shared language and history. It compares the pan-Arabism of independent public interest media with that of the mainstream in terms of its driving values and compatibility with a sense of pride in inclusive and pluralistic nationhood that rejects the sectarianism fuelling civil conflict. By reviewing examples of a multiplicity of different types of cross-border collaboration within the region and beyond, the essay concludes that the diversity of these connections and relationships strengthens a public interest media ecosystem that is otherwise quite fragile.

Keywords: Arab media, solidarity, injustice, digital citizenship, investigative journalism, exile, spyware

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What happens to journalism in countries where laws, ownership structures and intimidation of media practitioners render independent reporting extremely risky and technically almost impossible? Evidence from the most repressive environments in the Arab world reveals the courage and resourcefulness of people behind media initiatives that have sprung up across the region in the last 20 years – most of them in the 2010s – providing crucial insights into matters of public interest that are suppressed by state-controlled media. Repeatedly blocked online and harassed offline by government forces, these initiatives survive against the odds, often working with support networks that transcend national borders and involve far more varied relationships than simple dealings with foreign donors. Their interactions reflect a transnational sensibility, already evident in the lead-up to the 2010-11 uprisings, in which a concern for the direction of national affairs combines with a distinctive pan-Arab awareness and evolving global alliances in a way that counters the nationalist media agenda of authoritarian governments.

It is thus a paradox of their situation that ventures created to record and analyse the local affairs of individual nations engage in innovative transnational interactions in order to achieve their goals. This essay reviews what is new or noteworthy about these interactions in light of the specific context of a region that is already predisposed to cross-border exchange through shared language and history. It compares the pan-Arabism of independent public interest media with that of the traditional mainstream and considers the impact of mass displacements of people in the region through war and conflict, not only on the logistics of media operations but on attitudes to national symbols and concerns. It finds examples of solidarity among entities based in the Global North and Global South, often born of shared struggles against denial of access and the spyware used to deter and neutralise reporters.

Targeting the whole Arab world has long been the norm for Arab media organisations, from the days of newspaper publishing in the nineteenth century, through the use of radio in the mid-twentieth century and satellite television into the twenty-first. Today, it remains the approach of leading media groups such as Saudi-owned MBC, as well as the Arabic-language broadcasters of non-Arab countries, including BBC Arabic, DW and others. The difference with public interest media that cross national borders in the region is in topics they cover, the reporters they recruit and a mission far removed from the authoritarianism of mainstream Arab media or the public diplomacy of non-Arab operators. Indeed, they qualify as serving the public interest because they defend the human right to freedom of expression, whether through content that uncovers injustice and repression or exploration of social issues that rarely takes place in other forums.

Examples of the first kind include Raseef22 (meaning “sidewalk 22”), an online platform launched in 2013 by Kareem Sakka, a Syrian millionaire (El Masri, 2022, p. 135), from Beirut. The number in its name refers to all 22 Arab countries, as confirmed by Sakka in his declaration that Raseef22 takes a “stand on everything happening from the Arab Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean, always siding with the underdog

and the oppressed” (Sakka, 2024). Young journalists reporting for Raseef22 generally write about their own country (El Masri, 2022, p. 137) but, as the website explains, the community of subscribers making up what it calls NasRaseef (Raseef People) come from across countries where “justice is trampled upon” and fear “infiltrates” even the “most private spaces” (Raseef22, n.d.). Funding through subscription and advertising is augmented by a range of European donors.

An example of the second kind is Sowt (Voice), based in Jordan, which started in 2016 as a podcasting company when podcasts were still novel in the Arabic-speaking world. Sowt was able to launch three podcasts through a grant from the European Endowment for Democracy and increased this over time to 30, with money from the Media Development Investment Fund contributing to new acquisitions. One of its early shows, *Eib* (Shame), dealing with previously taboo issues of gender and sexuality, set the tone for a medium that was not about news but was intended to encourage listening and open-minded conversation. Sowt describes its journalism on its homepage as “authentic” and “nuanced”, created through journalistic “best practice” in such a way as to “make you stop scrolling and start pondering” (Sowt, n.d.).

The way projects like these combine innovative reporting and comment related to specific places with aspirations to reach publics across the region have precedents in pioneers that developed with the early rise of digital citizenship, whereby citizens found spaces through newly available online platforms to document individual and collective action to “voice perspectives, share feelings, and build solidarity” (Zayani & Khalil, 2024, p. 82). Nawaat, a Tunisian website launched by a group of activists from exile in 2004, started by focusing on fraud in that year’s Tunisian presidential election but branched out to include commentary and advocacy relating to the wider Arab world (Hali, 2022, p. 90). Nawaat’s continued potency as a source of independent journalism is underlined by its persistent blocking in Tunisia until 2011 and again in 2025.

Following closely on Nawaat in 2005 was an ambitious venture named Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ). Its expansion in the subsequent two decades exemplifies several aspects of the cross-border interactions that are a hallmark of Arab public interest media. Conceived as a regional initiative that would amplify the learning that comes from pathbreaking local reporting, ARIJ began life through the shared motivations of its original director, Jordanian editor Rana Sabbagh, and a Danish media development agency, International Media Support (IMS).

IMS was formed by five Danish media and human rights organisations in 2001 in the wake of conflicts in Rwanda and the Balkans where media were used to incite war. It brought a novel and independent approach to funding Arab media at a critical moment in global affairs. This was a point when the Arab suicide hijackings that killed nearly 3,000 people in the US in September 2001 prompted the Danish government to launch its Danish-Arab Partnership Programme (DAPP), with “partnership” effectively a euphemism for deradicalisation (Klausen, 2009, pp. 163-164).

IMS, albeit backed by DAPP, interpreted partnership differently. For example, it was highly critical of a failure to explore local needs on the part of US-backed media initiatives in Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003 (Sakr, 2006, p. 5). Significantly, with a 20-year time horizon, DAPP's unusually long-term commitment enabled IMS to take time to explore fresh approaches to working with individuals and institutions in the region that were perceived as reflecting "comradeship" and not imposing ideas (Kuttab, 2013).

ARIJ was one of these fresh approaches. The thinking behind it from the Danish side lay in offering professional and financial support to a new generation of Arab reporters interested in the methods needed for investigative journalism. Interest was evident in shows such as *Sirri lil-Ghaya* (Top Secret), which aired every other month on Al-Jazeera. Possibilities were also widened in principle by the introduction of the region's first Freedom of Information law in Jordan in 2007. In November 2008, after 79 journalists had received training and eight had attended a global conference on investigative reporting in Norway, ARIJ held its first conference in Amman, attracting 240 participants from 11 Arab countries and others including Sweden and the Philippines (IMS, 2008, pp. 45-46).

Since then, ARIJ's annual forums in Jordan have developed to bring together far larger numbers of media practitioners, donors and interested parties from across the Arab region and beyond for what has evolved into a packed hybrid online and offline programme. In 2020 the forum launched the Arab Fact Checkers Network, which grew to combine organisations and individuals from more than a dozen countries. The eighteenth forum in 2025, the year when US support for independent media was axed by President Donald Trump's White House along with other foreign aid, had the theme "Rise to the Challenge." It included a panel at which representatives of four diverse Syrian ventures, with bases inside and outside the country and plans to create a Consortium of Syrian Independent Media, assessed their situation a year after the Assad regime fell.

The effect of collaborative exposure to methods of investigative reporting used across the region and beyond should not be under-estimated when it comes to Arab journalism in the public interest. As Saba Bebawi has argued, those who suggest that "investigation" in this context would be considered normal journalism in any other situation overlook the obstacles created by decades of authoritarianism. These include public distrust of media, the reticence of officials, the social stigma attached to many topics and lack of access to public records, if indeed such records are kept (Bebawi, 2021).

At the same time, intra-regional networking like that generated by the coaching and mentoring set up through ARIJ has become another distinguishing feature of the pan-Arabism practised by Arab independent media. Febrayer Network grew organically from around 2017 out of an annual February meeting of IMS partners based in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria to promote regional and practical cooperation

among the participants' country-focused ventures. One of its members, *Mada Masr*, whose name roughly translates as "spanning Egypt", was started at a moment of extreme polarization in Egypt in 2013 by a group who had previously pledged to take a stand against "racism, sexism, xenophobia, religious discrimination, fascism and state violence" (Sakr, 2016, p. 48).

Partners in Febrayer pool resources to produce joint reports, such as one published in 2022 on the catastrophic Beirut port explosion of 2020. Benefiting from the group's non-Arab contacts, this was a joint investigation with Forensic Architecture, a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, which draws on multiple disciplines and new techniques to document state and corporate violence. Febrayer also oversees the Counter Academy of Arab Journalism, which started in 2019 to provide young journalists with the kind of education in history, social sciences, critical theory, feminism and other topics that do not feature in standard Arab journalism training. Graduates of the academy are offered paid internships within the network.

The fact that Febrayer, an Arab initiative, is based in Berlin says a lot about how profoundly successive conflict-driven displacements of people from Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria have affected the region. Around one million people of Syrian origin were living in Germany at the end of 2025, most of them having arrived there during the 2015-16 refugee crisis. Febrayer's Syrian member, *Al-Jumhuriya* (The Republic), founded in 2012 by a collective of journalists, writers and academics, is headquartered in Berlin but, like other media operating in exile, it brings content relating to what it calls the "entire Syrian geography" presented in a "uniquely Syrian voice" to publics inside and outside the country (Al-Jumhuriya, n.d.).

Cross-border communications are the basis for managing exiled media. Jummar, an independent media initiative established in 2022, projects its Iraqi national identity through its name, an Iraqi word for the palm heart that is linked to centuries of Iraqi food, culture and socio-economic practices. Yet its co-founders are based outside Iraq, coordinating a team of over 60 contributors inside the country who, instead of covering breaking news, analyse the politics of everyday life through reports on how different social groups in Iraq are affected by phenomena and events (Al-Kaisy, 2025, pp. 132-134) such as drought or drug addiction. At the same time as building a readership in Iraq and beyond, Jummar has collaborated with non-Iraqi media, producing reports on the rights of women and girls with the UK's *The Guardian* and sharing content with the Syrian platform *Al-Jumhuriya*.

In this way the inclusiveness of the national focus emphasised in projects such as Jummar and *Al-Jumhuriya* aligns with these projects' pan-Arab activities, marking a rupture not only with the hollow nationalism of media owned by or aligned with governments but also a rejection of the sectarianism that has long divided communities along confessional lines (Majed, 2023, pp. 80-81) in countries like Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. There, different branches of Islam and Christianity have traditionally

talked separately to themselves through inward-looking media tied to the interests of particular religious communities and self-interested sectarian political representation instead of talking to each other in a way that would promote social cohesion in a pluralistic community.

Indeed, many topics covered by nationally focused independent outlets resonate with audiences in more than one country, as demonstrated by a story that Lebanon's Diana Moukalled, previously a reporter for mainstream TV, chose to highlight when describing the alternative media project she co-founded in 2017. The founders named the project Daraj (Steps) in reference to the steps needed to get out of the "hole" they felt they were in (Taki, 2022). The story concerned the injustice meted out to young women killed for flouting social norms. The hostility the women faced is epitomised in a graveyard in northern Iraq where there is nothing to record their identity, as if they are also to be shunned in the afterlife. The public needs to "know these stories" and see such injustices in a "proper narrative and a proper context", Moukalled said, if they are to reject them (Taki, 2022).

When country-based outlets want to engage a pan-Arab audience, the practical question arises as to which kind of spoken Arabic to use in which context – whether local dialects or the formal language in use across the region. Sowt co-founder Ramsey Tesdell, speaking in 2024 after it had achieved over 12 million listens, described the multiple options as a "beautiful tapestry" (Reuters Institute, 2024). Forced migration has led people from different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds to become more familiar with each other over time. Tesdell noted that a generational shift meant younger listeners could switch readily from a Moroccan rapper to a Saudi YouTuber to a Palestinian Instagram account (Reuters Institute, 2024). A number of the new public interest outlets offer content in English as well as Arabic as another way to reach younger generations in the diaspora. When Al-Manassa, one of very few independent news sites operating in Egypt, started doing this in May 2025 one of its stated reasons was the number of young Egyptians who, even inside their country, had become detached from Arabic-language news. Another was that English today serves not only as the lingua franca of global dominance but also of "collective dissent" (Al Manassa, 2025).

Shared experience and collaboration include the international struggle to defend digital rights – the human rights to safety, privacy and freedom of expression in the digital sphere. In 2021 Daraj joined a consortium of 80 journalists from 17 outlets to launch the Pegasus Project, investigating governments' use of spyware sold by Israel's NSO Group to target reporters, human rights defenders, lawyers and political dissidents. By then the governments of eight Arab countries – Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and the UAE – featured among two dozen suspected government customers of prominent spyware companies (Woodhams, 2021, p. 6). Daraj co-founder Alia Ibrahim, discussing the personal toll of being spied on, said it was no longer just a matter of one's own phone being tapped but also family, friends and sources having their intimate details exposed, and

armies of bots and trolls spreading lies and attacking government critics. But she also noted the collaborative ecosystem that had evolved, of people who “share values and skills” who help us “to survive and move to the next level” (Benequista et al., 2021).

Collaborations connect organisations such as SMEX in Lebanon and the Jordan Open Source Association that are linked to individual countries and others that are international but with bases in the Middle East, such as Access Now, which has an office in Tunisia, and Digital Action, which has a Palestinian team. Al Manassa worked with Qurium Media Foundation in Sweden in 2020 to investigate the tool that was persistently blocking its domains and subdomains. It turned out to be the work of a Canadian company Sandvine, which, four years later, after lobbying by digital rights groups, was added to a US Department of Commerce blacklist that specifically cited the effect of Sandvine’s supply of technology to the government of Egypt (Guest, 2024).

Examples in this essay show that, in the sphere of independent public interest media, international solidarity comes in diverse guises. ARIJ is notable for having been co-created – at a propitious moment in the development of digital citizenship – through local expertise and ambition and a rare instance of flexible, long-term, foreign funding. Its lasting multiplier effect stimulates dialogue, learning and experimentation underpinned by a range of transnational connections. Partnerships and networks linking media initiatives across the region demonstrate a meshing of effective pan-Arab and organic national awareness that is both inclusive in its insistence on dignity, justice and human rights and open-minded in its global contacts in a way not seen in the declamatory pan-Arabism or forced nationalism of authoritarian regimes. Exiled media are managed through hybrid governance structures that coordinate media contributions remotely from European capitals to apply national and regional perspectives to matters of public interest that might otherwise be subject to sectarian treatment, if covered at all. Meanwhile expertise to counter spyware and blocking technology is mobilised globally to challenge a global threat. If diversity is a source of resilience, then the diversity of the ecosystem that results from collaborations like these should work in its favour.

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