Gulf Elites' Dependence on International Press in Times of Crisis: The US-Iran crisis 2019-2020

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ABSTRACT

International press coverage is often considered a legitimate source of informed opinion, especially during a political conflict such as the US-Iran crisis in 2019-2020. The international press coverage needs an in-depth understanding of such socio-political relationships to understand direct media effects and media dependability. Most studies have examined the intersection of international relations with communication and media studies and failed to consider the effects of emotional, cognitive and behavioural media on other non-state actors involved in the conflict. This study attempts to identify the degree to which the Gulf Elites – powerful non-state actors – depend and prefer the international press (newspapers) for following news coverage of the crisis, their news coverage professionalism, and news sources. An online survey was conducted with a snowball sampling technique which resulted in more than 200 Gulf Elites (following Al-Din Hassan's classification) in five Gulf countries: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, and Kuwait. The research indicated that, overall, these newspapers were followed/read to some extent, with a preference for accessing them online, confirming the ease of online accessibility in the region. The two UK newspapers were highly preferred compared to the two US and French newspapers. However, the news coverage of the crisis was described as lacking professionalism, and respondents showed a lack of interest in following such coverage, highlighting the emergence of Pan-Arab media.

Keywords: *American-Iranian relationship, Gulf Elites, news sources, international press, colonialism*.

INTRODUCTION

International press coverage is often considered a legitimate source of informed opinion. The growing impact of the international press reveals the increase in the hegemony of the market and the civil-society state (Salojärvi, 2016). It also fosters a certain sense of solidarity by creating virtual communities, or a "global village", thereby directing how citizens view both themselves and "the other" (Coban, 2016). Contextualising international press coverage during political conflict has been a concern (Nikunen, 2019). With ground reporters, translators, diverse insights, editorial liberalism, and real-time narratives, the international press has gained prominence in political-conflict reporting (Bruns, 2018). This study focuses on whether the Gulf Elites depend

on, and prefer, the international newspapers for news coverage of the US-Iran crisis in 2019-2020; their news coverage professionalism and the news sources. In particular, it examines how Gulf Elites perceive these newspapers in terms of readership, preference, reliance, preferred media subject, news coverage professionalism, motivations and news trustworthiness. The following section reviews the literature on media dependency theory and media influence, and this is followed by the methods section and the findings. Finally, after discussing the research results, the conclusion draws out the critical nuances of this paradigm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Press and Influence

The origin of the international press traces its roots back to colonialism and its consequences. Over the years, it has developed formidable agenda-setting (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020) and gatekeeping power (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2016; White, 1950), helping it to reach out to millions of viewers. As an informed public is a requirement for the democratic functioning of any society, the international press helps create awareness and impact on policy formulations (Fahmy & Johnson, 2007; McQuail, 2010). Agenda setting was developed after empirically researching the impact of media on the 1968 US presidential campaign, two professors – Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs – coined the term "Agenda-setting" which reflected the power of the media in creating public opinion. It further stated that issues often broadcast by the media assumed more importance in the public discourse (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). Gatekeeping, meanwhile, is the process of examining several potential news stories, filtering out many, and then choosing a few prominent stories for the day. This filtering process helps in the social creation of reality. This concept of "gatekeeping" was coined by David Manning White in 1950 (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2016; White, 1950).

Under specific circumstances – a lack of independent domestic media systems – the international press creates and channels political communication (Coban, 2016). This global news flow has further accelerated after globalisation, technological development, and innovation. So, the international press automatically became a "trusted reference" for nuanced analysis. This trust in media creates direct media effects, as well as dependability. For example, Gans (1979) emphasised that news editors must read the New York Times and the Washington Post before selecting a story. Though new non-Western international media outlets have also emerged in recent decades, their method of formatting news is still Western-centric in terms of journalism style (Ranji, 2021). Additionally, these new networks are primarily in broadcast media and quite limited compared with the traditional international press.

Therefore, those international press outlets that gain more media dependency have higher geostrategic influence and societal power e.g., CNN. Further, the term "CNN Effect" (Robinson, 2005) shows how traditional mainstream media played a pivotal role in foreign policy formulation, thereby giving these media more "legitimacy" (McLaughlin & Khawaja, 2000). The international press belonging to the British and US media system can be described as the "Anglo-America model" of mass media (Jang et al., 2021). The former is stronger than the latter in state intervention, liberal corporatism, and social democracy. The UK Independent and The Guardian – alongside the US's Washington Post and New York Times and France's Le Monde are among the world's most respected newspapers in news coverage and influence. At the same time, the international press has also been criticised for lacking historical-social knowledge about countries

where political crises emerge, often portraying a Western-specific orientalist perspective (Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Fiske, 2011). This distorted media image, particularly concerning the Arab world, often becomes problematic and inhibits any form of resolution (BBC, 2013; Elareshi et al., 2020; Fahmy & Johnson, 2007). In the presence of state-sponsored media merely acting as mouthpieces for the governments in conflicts, the international press does a balancing act (Fahmy & Kim, 2008).

Nevertheless, the international press's representations of Arabs and Muslims have often been questioned (Hečková, 2016; Semaan, 2014). On the one hand, the international press started analysing controversial and less-reported issues, particularly on political crises. The oligopolistic nature of media agencies and their occupational structure and funding has also been scrutinised in detail (McPhail, 2010). On the other hand, they have also been accused of stereotyping (Ridouani, 2011; Semaan, 2014), overgeneralization, hyper-reality (Tramboo & Antony, 2010), and "yellow journalism" (Kaplan, 2014). Hyper-reality is a concept coined by Jean Baudrillard in his book "Simulacra and Simulation", first published in French in 1981. It explains the public's inability to distinguish between truth and simulation, or between reality and blended-reality, often fostered by the media (for more views see Tramboo & Antony, 2010). While, the term "yellow journalism" emerged in the United States in the 1890s as a criticism of the sensationalism and populism then practised by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer to get greater readership in New York (Kaplan, 2014). Regardless of these debates, the international press – irrespective of their social, political, and economic contexts of operating – has ushered in a new age of public awareness and participation in political communication (Muswede & Lubinga, 2018).

Additionally, it has also strengthened the coverage of under-reported political crises worldwide. For example, the radical transformation witnessed in the Arab world since the pro-democracy uprisings of 2011 has been widely covered by the international press, whereas the rivalries and tensions within the regional powers of the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, could have camouflaged the domestic media's lens (Alaaldin, 2019). Therefore, the international press has portrayed a comparatively "balanced" perspective by not delving into these conflagrations and historical tensions. At the same time, the impact of the international press's narratives did highlight how readers were still dependent on them. To understand this further, we investigate this dependence on the international press, especially by the Gulf Elite during coverage of the US-Iran crisis in 2019-2020. This scrutiny is done by applying the paradigm of media dependency theory within the context of the opinions of the Gulf Elite in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain.

Media Dependency Theory
With the beginning of media studies, the Hypodermic Needle Theory — introduced in the 1920s — gave enormous importance to media effects and considered audience members merely passive spectators. However, after a few years, the Uses and Gratification Theory completely twisted the context, stating that the audience had more power in using, filtering, and associating with media-projected realities. Both these theoretical concepts, however, often fail to ask the right questions to the right degree, as in several instances it is stated that the relationship between the media and its respective users is asymmetrical. The asymmetrical nature of the

relationship is further exaggerated during political and social conflicts when there is a burgeoning demand for more information (Ball-Rokeach, 1998).

As most of these theories that scrutinise the media's role in shaping political perception are often born in the West, they create a specific knowledge gap when referring to political conflicts in the Arab world. Therefore, the Media Dependency Theory (MDT) provides a theoretical alternative in terms of stating how the audience-media-society relationship can be understood, especially in societies where media has a central role, often during periods of social change and social conflict (Ahmed et al., 2019; Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The mass communication process cannot be examined in a social vacuum or operate in isolation without a society-based framework.

The theory also considers the long-term effects of media dependency on the audience; this has been studied in the Cultivation Theory, but has not been applied within the society framework. The more complex the social framework of a society grows, the more the difference between the individual's and the society's goal changes, i.e. from the micro to the macro level, thereby making the contextualization of society necessary (Patwardhan & Ramaprasad, 2005). The MDT also proposes that the impact of the media's messages on the audience will be proportional to the degree of the media's dependence. The concept of dependency has been further explained as the relationship in which audience members' capacity to achieve their goals depends on the media resources' information system. These information resources play a pivotal role in gathering, processing, and disseminating the information (Mehrad & Yousefi, 2018).

Media dependency increases during political conflicts (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Mehrad & Yousefi, 2018). The various trajectories in which the media's presence is imminent include information, conflict mediation, governance, and even conflict prevention. The evolution of technologies employed by the media in fragile and conflict-prone states helps in the immediate dissemination of information within the social framework of fragile and conflict-prone states (Betz, 2018). With the dramatic change in the nature and process of political conflict, high-intensity conflicts should be differentiated from low-intensity conflicts. The former occurs between states and is more violent in nature, while the latter occurs between the state's armies or involves several non-state actors. It is possible for one form of conflict to transform from high intensity to low intensity after a period of time. For example, when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, this was a high-intensity conflict, but it later became a low-intensity conflict resulting from the US's continued military presence and the retaliation caused by it (Proctor, 2020).

In high-intensity conflicts, the relationship between the international press and the actors perpetuating political conflict is mutually dependent, even if it might be asymmetrical (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012). Political conflicts need the international press to amplify their reality, often ignored within their domestic set-up, while the international media need such episodes to attract eyeballs (Seethaler et al., 2013). Therefore, as this mutual dependency advances, it is necessary to scrutinise the impact on the cognitive and behavioural processes of the readers as the coverage of the political conflict is carried out.

Emotional, Cognitive, and Behavioural Influences of Media
The consequences of media coverage cannot be broadly studied in oversimplified and generalised paradigms. It is necessary to be specific and to ask questions related to the media's effects, considering the amount of investment of time and capital that often goes into media

coverage in terms of usage and function (McQuail, 2010). Therefore, this study discusses the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of media usage in order to understand media dependency. Several empirical and theoretical analyses of the media's impact on emotions and sensations have been carried out in recent decades (Nikunen, 2019). The emotional impact of media was the subject of some of the first studies done in media studies.

With the shift towards cognitive psychology in the 1970s and 1980s, the media's impact on emotions remained an exciting field of inquiry. Bryant (2013) continues to study the impact of media on emotions (Nikunen, 2019), thereby establishing his three-factor theory of emotion. Creating an interdisciplinary framework within psychology and communication, this theory reveals the impact of external stimulus and the internal body's response after media consumption (Bryant, 2013). Additionally, research shows that aesthetic qualities, size of images (especially images of violence), and method of narrative have an impact on the positive and negative emotions developed by an individual after news consumption. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) study, done by Watson et al. (1988), corroborates this emotional impact of media on the audience's mind.

Turning to the cognitive impact, the context here deals more with the audience's thinking and knowledge and less with their attitude (Arendt & Matthes, 2014; Kepplinger et al., 2012). It focuses on how people view themselves and their social construction of reality, and how their judgements and dependencies are later created (Arendt & Matthes, 2014). Often through narrative-based news stories, such as highly triggered political conflicts, the media frames the context and attributes responsibility to the various actors involved (Kepplinger et al., 2012). This kind of framing has an immense impact on the recipients' cognition, thereby creating triggers, intense reactions, dependency, and degrees of preference (Kepplinger et al., 2012). Especially in the Arab world, where media outlets often act as "propaganda" arms of the state machinery, the demand for international media increases (Abdullah & Elareshi, 2015; Horan, 2010; Richter & Kozman, 2021). As the Arab public sphere is yet to discern a negotiated-system change through the democratising aspect of its domestic media, the "international" character of the media makes it cognitively more necessary (Duffy, 2014). This also then affects the behavioural aspect of media consumption regarding the recipients' degree of preference and their dependence on a few selected international press outlets.

Finally, the media is said to influence and later alter recipients' behaviour, especially in the political domain (Enikolopov & Petrova, 2017). First, it can change prior beliefs by providing new information, and second, it can persuade. In certain cases, the media's biases can also change the underlying behaviour of the recipients", even if they are rational (Gentzkow & Kamenica, 2016). Therefore, in the context of political conflict, when the recipients are already in fragile socio-economic and political states in terms of social realities, the effect of media behaviour impacts their dependence and the trajectory of their preferences.

Gulf Elites and the US-Iran Political Conflict
This paper studies the impact of the international press on coverage of the US-Iran crisis of 2019-2020 by the Gulf Elites of UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. The term "Gulf Elite" here refers to the business communities in these countries, which have a long history of economic and political influence (Amani et al., 2019). These Elites have been unconditionally

necessary for the ruling families, as they have helped maintain and sustain the status quo, even before the beginning of the oil-dependent rentier state models (Kamrava et al., 2016; Rodan, 2007). Over this period, with the growing influence in the Gulf politics of Western countries such as the US, the UK, and France, the identity and interests of these Gulf Elites turned transnational (Fahmy & Kim, 2008). Therefore, the Gulf Elites established relations with the global Elites as the Arab world continued to be a geostrategic focal point of capital-oriented profits.

With the advent of liberalisation, the Gulf Elites made further efforts to strengthen and preserve the status quo (Mirtaheri, 2016). It was of utmost importance for the global hegemony to eradicate any chance of regime change in the Gulf, thereby further solidifying the mechanisms that preserved the identities and interests of the Gulf Elites (Hanieh, 2011). Over recent decades, the regional Cold War-like security dilemma and the mistrust between Saudi Arabia and Iran have normalised the Gulf countries' sectarian tensions. Instead of merely being reduced to Sunni-versus-Shia or Arab-versus-Persian identities, these tensions became more about claiming Islamic legitimacy and having two different, overtly competing visions of regional order (Wehrey, 2014). In the absence of a regional collective security arrangement, the Gulf Arab rulers' dependency on Western countries, particularly the US, dramatically increased over recent decades (Amani et al., 2019). This has been accompanied by a complete rejection of Iran, along with a fear of Iran exporting its 1979 revolution to its regional neighbours (Kaussler & Hastedt, 2017).

At the same time, US-Iran bilateral ties have witnessed bad-faith diplomacy, especially concerning the nuclear programme and consequent sanctions (Jahanbani, 2020; Kaussler & Newkirk, 2012). The 2019 US-Iran political conflict, created as a result of the killing of Iran's Major General Qasem Soleimani, in a "defensive action", has further damaged the future possibility of negotiations (Thomas, 2020). There are also concerns that Islamic State could resurface in the Levant as retaliation against American military intervention (Jahanbani, 2020).

Starting from this context, understanding the coverage of the US-Iran political conflict by the international press needs an in-depth understanding of the two countries' relationship. There are several reasons behind this quest. First, with the impact of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the US-Iran political conflict became side-lined (Jahanbani, 2020), yet its socio-economic and political implications, especially concerning the identities and interests of the citizens of the Arab world, cannot be ignored. Second, most studies have examined the intersection of international relations with communication media studies, and failed to consider the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural media effects on other non-state actors involved in the conflict. Third, the narrative of US-Iran rivalry will have a consequential impact on developing the low-intensity conflict between these states within the regional geostrategic territories (Amani et al., 2019). Lastly, the Gulf Elites' degree of preference and dependence on international press outlets reveals another type of economic relationship that continues to maintain the status quo.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the above discussion, this research is interested in knowing whether the Gulf Elites depend on the international press for news sources regarding the US-Iran crisis of 2019-2020. In pursuing this, the research questions are concerned with exploring and perceiving the importance of the international press in terms of news sources and news coverage.

RQ1: What is the dependence of the Gulf Elites on consideration of opinions of the international press?
RQ2: What is the preferred international press used by the Gulf Elites for shaping informed opinions?
RQ3: What topics are preferred by the Gulf Elites?
RQ4: What are the main factors that persuade the Gulf Elites to read these newspapers?
RQ5: What is the trust factor involved in shaping informed opinions regarding the US-Iran crisis?

METHODOLOGY

The Sample
To classify which international press is most read in the region, 25 academics, analysts, and journalists were asked to identify the most important and the most followed English-language international newspapers. A list of 21 well-known international newspapers from the US, the UK, France, Spain, Germany, Australia, China, and Russia were provided. International Arab press is owned by Gulf governments (e.g., Al-Sharq al-Awsat and Al-Hayat Al-Saudi are owned by Saudi Arabia, Al-Quds Al-Arabi is owned by Qatar, Al-Arab Al-London is owned by the UAE), were excluded from the list because of their ownership and editorial policies which follow their governments' direction and positions. Thus, five newspapers were selected based on their views: two US newspapers, The Washington Post (WP) and The New York Times (NYT); two UK newspapers, The Guardian and The Independent; and the French Le Monde.

Participants
The Gulf Elites' dependence on, and attitude towards, different international press (mentioned above) regarding news coverage of the 2019 US-Iran crisis were examined. In doing so, the study targeted one segment of Gulf society, the "Gulf Elites". A sample of Elites from five Gulf countries was studied using the snowball sampling approach (shown in Table 1) as part of a convenience sample. We followed al-Din Hassan's (2004) categories in classifying our elite respondents. These are: academic elite, political elite, and media elite, i.e. elites belonging to fields such as media and journalism and politics and working in the public and private sectors.

Given Covid-19 restrictions, the sampling approach was sufficient as meeting participants in person was not allowed during this period. The sampling approach allowed us ease in data gathering. The procedure was to send the survey link to some known participants (roughly a few from each country) and to request them to recruit other participants from their colleagues, friends, and peers in the same field. A total of 225 responses were initially collected. Filters were deployed to exclude respondents who did not complete the questions, yielding a final sample of 207 participants. Data was collected from March to May 2020. Table 1 summarises the demographic features of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic features

	Indicator	N=207	%
Gender	Male	150	72.5
	Female	57	27.5
Age	20-30	28	13.5
	31-40	30	14.5
	41-50	63	30.4
	51+	86	41.5
Education	High school	16	7.7
	University	64	30.9
	MA/PhD	127	61.4
Job	Academic elite	82	39.6
	Media elite	80	38.6
	Political elite	45	21.7
Country	KSA	76	36.7
	Kuwait	43	20.8
	UAE	39	18.8
	Bahrain	27	13.0
	Oman	22	10.6

The Questionnaire

A pre-structured questionnaire included questions about the general following and reading of the international press as a news source, readership preference and reliance, media subjects, newspapers' coverage of the crisis, news professionalism, motivations for reading each newspaper, and news trustworthiness.

In detail, the general questions asked about the frequency with which respondents read each of the five newspapers ("yes"/"no"); their readership preference ("paper", "online", "both"); their reliance on these newspapers for obtaining news about the crisis ("fully rely on", "sometimes", "don't use"); the most followed media subjects ("political", "economic", "social", "cultural", "sports", "scientific); newspapers' news coverage of the crisis ("professional", "good", "weak", "don't use"); news motivations, with respondents asked about their motivations for reading each newspaper's coverage of the crisis, with 14 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (5= "strongly agree" and 1= "strongly disagree"); and the newspapers' news trustworthiness ("high", "medium", "low"). Finally, some questions on personal details asked respondents to give their gender, age, education, job, and country.

Data Analysis
A different statistical coefficient test was adopted, via IBM SPSS software, to examine the extent of statistically significant differences between demographic variables. The following analyses were performed to test the research questions:
● Frequency counts and percentages.
● Mann-Whitney U-test to compare gender differences, and Kruskal-Wallis test to compare significant differences between other demographic variables with three or more groups.
● Cross-tabulation for the degree of relationship between independent and dependent variables, as appropriate.

RESULTS

The Reported Frequency of Gulf Elites' Following/Reading International Press
Respondents were asked to state which of the selected international press publications they followed (Table 2). The results indicated that the US newspaper WP was read by most respondents, followed by the two UK newspapers, The Guardian and The Independent. More than half of the respondents followed the news in the NYT, while Le Monde was less read.

Table 2: Reported following of international press

Newspaper	Statistics in %			Sig.				
	N	Yes	No	Gen.	Age	Edu.	Country	Job
The WP	207	73.4	26.6	.031	.363	.043	.632	.477
Guardian	207	69.6	30.4	.142	.028	.085	.655	.957
Independent	207	65.7	34.3	.612	.902	.707	.290	.243
The NYT	207	59.9	40.1	.497	.001	.000	.158	.485
Le Monde	207	44.9	55.1	.664	.064	.515	.717	.442

The Mann-Whitney U and the Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to verify any significant difference among the reported frequencies with which these newspapers were subscribed in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region ($p>$ .05). The findings revealed no significant differences between respondents' country and job type and their following of these newspapers. However, a significant difference emerged between respondents' gender and the news that they followed in the WP ($p>$ 0.031); between their age and their following of The Guardian ($p>$ 0.028) and NYT news ($p>$ 0.001); and between their education level and their following of NYT ($p>$ 0.000) and WP ($p>$ 0.043) news.

Newspaper Readership Preferences
When respondents were asked how they would prefer to read the selected newspapers, it was clear that the majority chose the online version over the print version (Table 3). This could be because Gulf Elites have easy access to the Internet, as these countries are well-known among other Arab countries for their Internet and smart-technology developments (Ziani & Elareshi, 2016).

Table 3: Reported newspaper readership preferences

Newspaper		Statistics in %				Sig.			
	N	Online	Paper	Both	Gen.	Age	Edu.	Country	Job
Independent	207	74.4	17.9	7.7	.052	.032	.450	.621	.434
Guardian	207	74.4	18.8	6.8	.304	.042	.032	.294	.279
The WP	207	72.0	18.4	9.7	.155	.014	.171	.798	.900
Le Monde	207	63.3	21.7	15.0	.136	.001	.121	.058	.011
The NYT	207	62.3	25.1	12.6	.065	.001	.100	.928	.992

As shown in Table 3, using the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests to verify the significant difference among the demographic variables (*p*> .05) and their newspaper readership preferences. The findings revealed that there was a significant difference between the age of respondents and their readership preference for The Independent (*p*> 0.032), The Guardian (*p*> 0.042), The NYT (*p*> 0.001), The WP (*p*> 0.014), and Le Monde (*p*> 0.001). There was no statistical significant difference between their education and their job, except for one significant difference each regarding The Guardian (*p*> 0.032) and Le Monde (*p*> 0.011).

Reliance on Newspapers During The Crisis
As mentioned earlier, most respondents indicated that they read the selected newspapers daily (Table 4). When asked about the crisis, the majority of respondents "fully relied" on the UK newspapers (The Independent, 61.8% and The Guardian, 55.6%), followed by The NYT (51.7%). Despite being well-known, The WP and Le Monde were relied on less for news regarding the crisis.

Table 4: Reported level of reliance on newspapers for news about the 2019 US-Iran crisis

Newspaper		Statistics in %				Sig.			
	N	Fully rely	Sometimes	Don't use	Gen.	Age	Edu.	Country	Job
Independent	207	61.8	21.3	16.9	.308	.025	.386	.307	.720
Guardian	207	55.6	32.4	12.1	.040	.010	.294	.414	.520
The NYT	207	51.7	23.7	24.6	.066	.008	.101	.667	.433
The WP	207	46.4	35.3	18.4	.561	.000	.000	.925	.996
Le Monde	207	32.9	42.0	25.1	.326	.008	.124	.575	.560

Through the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests (Table 4), the analysis revealed that statistically, there was no significant difference (*p*> .05) between the country, job, and gender of the Gulf Elites and their reliance on selected newspapers for news about the crisis, except one significant difference in terms of their gender and education e.g., The Guardian (*p*> 0.040) and The WP (*p*> 0.000) respectively. Furthermore, the analysis indicated a significant difference between the age of the Gulf Elites and their reliance on these newspapers for news about the crisis, e.g., The Independent (*p*> .025), The Guardian (*p*> .010), The NYT (*p*> .008), The WP (*p*> .000), Le Monde (*p*> .008).

Preferred Media Subjects in Newspapers
Respondents were also asked to indicate the media subjects that were most read in the selected newspapers (Table 5). The findings indicated that, while respondents preferred political and

economic issues in some newspapers, they had less interest in what other newspapers provided in terms of social, culture, sports, and science. Interestingly, respondents indicated reading more political content in Le Monde than in the other newspapers. There is no clear indication as to why our respondents were less interested in following other media subjects, especially concerning international news.

Table 5: Reported preferred subject content in newspapers

Newspaper	N	Statistics in %						Sig.				
		politics	economic	social	culture	sports	science	Gen.	Age	Edu.	Country	Job
Le Monde	175	63.4	24.0	1.7	5.1	2.3	3.4	.504	.734	.035	.626	.590
Independent	195	55.4	20.0	11.8	4.6	3.6	4.6	.065	.947	.469	.058	.392
The WP	186	51.1	33.9	11.3	0.0	0.0	3.8	.445	.167	.335	.138	.471
Guardian	197	29.9	20.3	11.7	20.8	13.2	4.1	.666	.097	.093	.450	.007
The NYT	173	22.5	67.6	1.7	6.4	1.7	0.0	.654	.020	.255	.006	.760

Through the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests (Table 5), the analysis revealed no significant difference (*p*> .05) between the gender, age, education, country, and job type of the respondents and their preferred media subject in the newspapers, except for one significant difference each in their age, education, and country, e.g., The NYT (*p*> 0.020), Le Monde (*p*> 0.035), The Guardian (*p*> 0.006) respectively.

Newspaper Professionalism in Covering the US-Iran crisis
Respondents were asked to evaluate the professionalism of the selected newspapers in terms of news coverage of the US-Iran crisis, the majority of respondents described the coverage as "weak", as shown in Table 6. In contrast, some mentioned Le Monde and The Independent as being "good" and more professional than the others in the way that they covered the crisis. Respondents' motivations explain such claims.

Table 6: Reported newspapers' professionalism in covering the 2019 US-Iran crisis

Newspaper	N	Statistics in %				Sig.				
		Prof	Good	Weak	DK	Gen.	Age	Edu.	Country	Job
Le Monde	207	23.2	34.3	38.2	4.3	.724	.891	.134	.406	.164
Independent	207	15.9	31.4	36.7	15.9	.130	.572	.769	.337	.460
The WP	207	15.0	17.4	58.9	8.7	.002	.268	.033	.103	.558
The NYT	207	13.5	26.6	47.3	12.6	.001	.006	.009	.213	.680
Guardian	207	8.2	18.4	66.2	7.2	.346	.706	.898	.319	.972

Using the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests (Table 6), the findings showed no statistically significant difference between the job and the country of the respondents and their views of newspapers' professionalism in covering the US-Iran crisis. However, the findings indicated significant differences between respondents' gender (e.g., The NYT *p*> .001 and The WP *p*> .002), age (NYT *p*> .006), and education (NYT *p*> .009, WP *p*> .033) and their evaluation of news coverage by these newspapers.

Main Factors Driving Respondents to Read Specific Newspapers
To understand the motivations for relying on, and following, specific newspapers, respondents were asked about their main motivations for reading each newspaper's coverage of the crisis.

Table 7: Mean scores for reported motivations for reading specific newspapers

I read [NEWSPAPER NAME] coverage of the crisis because [it/I] . . .	1	2	3	4	5
Emotional	**2.42**	**2.61**	**2.19**	**2.39**	**2.33**
- don't read it because I don't have free time	4.17	4.04	3.74	3.92	3.82
- its objectivity, impartiality and accuracy in what it presents	1.94	2.48	1.72	1.94	2.01
- "trust" its published news	1.88	2.26	1.66	1.87	1.74
- for curiosity	1.71	1.64	1.64	1.84	1.73
Cognitive	**1.79**	**1.98**	**1.77**	**1.78**	**1.96**
- meets my needs about reporting events	2.08	2.33	2.02	2.09	2.91
- presents different viewpoints about events	2.11	2.30	1.91	1.97	2.10
- provides evidence and logical statements about the crisis	1.74	2.13	1.72	1.97	1.79
- for my work and professional field	1.69	1.77	1.70	1.51	1.47
- know the methods of presenting arab issues in this newspaper	1.56	1.80	1.65	1.59	1.73
- know its goals through its coverage of events	1.55	1.58	1.62	1.64	1.73
Behavioural	**2.86**	**2.89**	**2.78**	**2.96**	**2.82**
- do not read it because it does not serve my country's interests	3.92	3.94	3.97	4.02	3.74
- do not read it because I prefer to watch news channels	3.68	3.54	3.51	3.85	3.60
- provides news materials that help me to make good decisions	2.15	2.35	1.91	2.26	1.99
- discuss the published news with others	1.69	1.76	1.73	1.73	1.93

1= WP (n=188), 2= Guardian (n=193), 3= NYT (n=184), 4= Independent (n=171), 5= Le Monde (n=170)

The majority of respondents indicated less interest in these newspapers' news coverage of the crisis. In particular, they did not have free time to read this coverage. Instead, and interestingly, they preferred to watch news channels, or they thought that the newspapers' coverage did not serve their countries' interests. At the same time, some read the newspapers because the publications met their needs in terms of reporting events. Others mentioned that these newspapers presented different viewpoints about events (especially The WP, The Guardian, and Le Monde), that they provided news materials that helped them to make good decisions (especially The WP, The Guardian, and The Independent), and that they were objective, impartial, and accurate (especially The Guardian and Le Monde). Furthermore, respondents highlighted that they read The Guardian, particularly for its news trustworthiness and its evidence and logical statements about the crisis. We expected these newspapers to have a high readership rate because they support Western politics and views, which should favour the Gulf Elites over the widening of Iranian influence in the GCC region.

Newspaper Trustworthiness
Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the trustworthiness of the news coverage in the selected newspapers regarding the US-Iran crisis (Table 8). The majority of respondents indicated a low "trust" in the news coverage of these newspapers. Although they followed and read news

about the crisis in these newspapers, they indicated a low level of "trust" in their coverage of such matters.

Table 8: Reported newspapers' "trustworthiness" in covering the 2019 US-Iran crisis

Newspaper	Statistics in %				Sig.				
	N	High	Mid	Low	Gen.	Age	Edu.	Country	Job
Le Monde	207	23.7	34.3	42.0	.363	.207	.741	.049	.304
Independent	207	16.4	39.6	44.0	.031	.696	.352	.946	.991
The NYT	207	14.5	41.5	44.0	.915	.493	.477	.196	.917
The WP	207	14.5	36.2	49.3	.128	.387	.813	.442	.440
Guardian	207	12.1	34.8	53.1	.100	.381	**.000**	.365	.699

The Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests showed only two significant differences between the gender and education of respondents and their views of the "trustworthiness" of the selected newspapers in covering the US-Iran crisis (Table 8). Significant differences emerged regarding The Independent and The Guardian (p> .031, p> .000 respectively). Male respondents (71.3%) were more likely to read the Independent than females (69.4%), while female respondents (30.6%) preferred reading the Guardian compared to males (29%), which suggests that our respondents perceive these two newspapers as trustworthy.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

International newspapers increase people's awareness of news information, events, and culture worldwide. The power of the international press is in its news selection and emphasis, which sets the discussion agenda for the public and other media (Coban, 2016). An online survey investigated the perceptions of Gulf Elites in five Gulf countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, and Oman – in an attempt to discover their dependency on the international press for news sources regarding the US-Iran crisis, their preferences, reliance, and preferred media subjects, as well as their views on the news coverage's professionalism, its motivations, and trustworthiness.

In theory, these newspapers are seen as more liberal and they play a vital role as premier members of the Elite press around the world, especially in covering international events. Based on the findings, most respondents somehow followed the selected newspapers, especially The WP (mainly females and those with high school-level education), The Guardian (mainly those aged 41-50), and The NYT (mainly those aged 20-30 and those educated to university level). In general, all these newspapers were followed/read by our respondents to some extent, with a preference for accessing them online (RQ1). They also preferred accessing these newspapers through the online version. These findings confirmed the ease of online accessibility for almost all the age categories, with The Independent being more accessible online to younger people while The Guardian was more accessible online to adults.

When it comes to relying on news coverage about the crisis, the two UK newspapers were preferred compared to the two US and the French newspapers. This indicates that the two UK newspapers were most popular as news sources in terms of coverage of the crisis (RQ2). Fahmy and Kim (2010) state that the British press is strong on intervention, liberal corporatism, and social democracy compared with the US press. It might be true that the UK press enjoys more

freedom and is more inquisitive compared with the US press, although their coverage is influenced according to both countries' political and public opinion (Fahmy, 2007).

Interestingly, our respondents do not take much notice of social, sports, or science subjects in these leading newspapers. Those respondents who read and relied on these newspapers preferred issues related to politics (in the case of Le Monde, the Independent, and the WP) or economic content (The NYT) (RQ3). Further investigation is needed to understand such attitudes. However, one explanation may be related to the professionalism of these newspapers and their news coverage of the crisis, as our respondents evaluated them as lacking professionalism and described them as "weak" or "good".

This is why, when asked about the motivations for following and reading these newspapers, respondents surprisingly showed a lack of interest (RQ4). As these newspapers are among the giants and Elites of Western newspapers, the expectation was that respondents would rely on them for international news coverage, but our findings told a different story. Their attitudes confirmed that the Gulf Elites have abandoned following these newspapers, either in favour of international news channels or because they have different agendas and interests (reflecting their behavioural attitudes) (Fahmy, 2010). It was not clear why our respondents abandoned these newspapers, but their attitudes may be understood in terms of political stance regarding the crisis (Kaussler & Newkirk, 2012; Wehrey, 2014). The respondents also considered the emotional factor in following these newspapers, especially regarding their lack of free time. However, the respondents somehow perceived these newspapers to be objective, impartial, and trustworthy in their news coverage. Regarding the cognitive factor, it seems that these newspapers have met respondents' needs by providing different viewpoints and logical statements about the crisis. They also helped respondents in their professional careers and presented news coverage of Arab issues.

Such findings did not support Gans's (1979) assumption that these giant newspapers dominate and lead the information flow globally. It seems that the emergence of Pan-Arab media since the mid-1990s, along with the Internet and the 2011 uprisings, have changed how Gulf Elites follow and obtain news information about events around them. These newspapers' news coverage was followed with suspicion by the Elites, and they were therefore perceived as being less trustworthy or credible (RQ5). This was perhaps because they thought that these newspapers did not serve the respondents' countries' interests, or because they found refuge in watching news channels, or they did not have sufficient free time to read these newspapers. Elareshi and Gunter (2012) indicated that Pan-Arab media, such as Al-Jazeera TV, was powerful enough to match even non-Arabic media services such as the BBC and CNN, and attracted distinctive opinions and views in contrast to those associated with Western media.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper was interested in knowing whether Gulf Elites depend on the international press for news sources regarding the 2019 US-Iran crisis (Amani et al., 2019). However, this study covered only five Gulf countries' elites, as we were unable to cover Qatar, which has been acknowledged as a limitation. Its main strength leans in examining the importance of the international press as news sources for Gulf Elites, a subject where there has previously been a dearth of evidence. It is, however, reliant only on the testimonies of Gulf Elites, which admittedly limits how far the findings can be generalised to other population groups. Therefore, we highly recommend future

research, based on the existing work, that covers wider populations, with different sample sizes, methods, and data collection.

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