

## **Framing the Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Comparative Analysis of Arabic and English News Sources**

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The mass exodus of millions of Syrians from their country due to worsening war conditions has become a serious global humanitarian crisis. As the number of displaced refugees rises, so does the number of those living in inhuman conditions. This content analysis examines how popular news discourses shape the geopolitics of the Syrian refugee crisis. We use framing theory to explore the main frames that emerged in a comparison of 10 Arabic news sources with seven English news sources in their coverage of the crisis. Based on a systematic random sample, 278 Arabic news stories and 210 English news stories were selected for further analysis. Qualitative data analysis software was used to code and analyze the content of news stories at the article and sentence levels. Four main frames emerged from the analysis: border, institutional, victim, and war frames. Although the border frame was popular across all news sources, English sources were more likely than Arabic sources to use the victim frame and less likely to use the war frame. Implications as well as directions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords: Arabic, journalism, news, framing, refugees, content analysis*

Media messages play a significant role in shaping geopolitical conditions and our understanding of the global balance of power. News frames, for instance, shape popular imaginations of issues of global concern such as wars, disasters, and crises. Popular Western discourses on migration and refugees become a public diplomacy tool to construct international geopolitical space and boundaries (Pamment, 2014). Although the United Nations (1951) defines refugees as persons “who have crossed national borders due to a ‘well-founded’ fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion” (Convention of 1951, Article 1A (2) , media stories use specific frames to construct audiences’ notions of refugees. Even while centering such discourses on human suffering, such frames often construct victims, persecutors, and saviors in ways that reproduce geopolitical hierarchies (Chouliaraki, 2015). These discourses (among other factors such

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as immigration laws, political leanings, and interpersonal experiences) shape public opinions about immigration and refugee resettlement.

Building on research into how conflicts and crises are represented in media stories, the current project explores the news framing of the Syrian refugee crisis by English and Arabic media. Although several scholars have examined international news coverage of crises and disasters, most of these studies explore a single news outlet or a handful of news outlets rather than documenting the breadth of diversity in news coverage across various media organizations. The present study uses a content analysis approach to examine the key frames that emerge about the Syrian refugee crisis in 10 Arabic and seven English news sources.

### **Background and Context**

According to the Migration Policy Centre (2016), there are an estimated 11 million Syrian refugees worldwide. More than 4 million of these refugees are in bordering countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, with Turkey alone hosting just over 3 million registered refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Refugees Operational Data Portal, 2018). A recorded 797,605 refugees are within the European Union, with Germany hosting nearly 50% of them (Migration Policy Centre, 2016). In 2015, under increasing pressure from the international community, then U.S. president Barack Obama agreed to resettle about 10,000 refugees across 231 cities (Park & Omri, 2016). Similarly, Canada has resettled more than 30,000 Syrian refugees (Government of Canada, 2016). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2018) estimates that 51% of the refugees are male, 48% are female, and most are in the 18–59 age group.

These rising numbers indicate a worsening political and military situation that is rooted in a seven-year-long Syrian civil war. The conflict is rife with myriad players whose alliances and roles are not only shifting but also contributing to a grave humanitarian crisis. Though there are efforts to support and fund military cooperation, little consensus has been reached on the plight and status of Syrian refugees worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The past few years have been marked by troubling policies toward Syrian refugees across Europe and North America. For example, as former U.S. president Obama announced his plan to accept refugees in November 2015, nearly 31 governors responded with indignation, asserting a “right” to refuse entry of these refugees into their states. Although these claims were legally baseless, the controversy highlights the politicization of the crisis within U.S. conservative discourses on terrorism and national security. Indeed, right-wing political pundits and governors related their concerns to the Paris bombings and reports that at least one of the suspects was of Syrian origin (Fantz & Brumfield, 2015). This backlash has been evident in U.S. president Donald Trump’s executive orders to place a temporary ban on migrants from several predominantly Muslim nations.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve is a NATO-funded mission that has provided military and tactical assistance to regional, ethnic, and paramilitary groups combating DAESH (a translation of the Arabic acronym formed of the same words that make up ISIS in English) militants.

Political schemes instrumentalizing Syrian refugees are also apparent throughout Europe. In 2016, Germany brokered a deal between the European Union and Turkey, in which all “irregular migrants” arriving to Europe from Turkey would be immediately returned to Turkey (Pamuk & Baczynska, 2016). The deal has been criticized by human rights activists worldwide, noting the already hostile conditions that refugees in Turkey face. Several countries in Europe have proposed quota systems for accepting refugees, and some have outright rejected all refugees. Led by right-wing prime minister Viktor Orban, Hungary has opposed resettlement and has garnered worldwide attention for a video showing a reporter kicking and attacking Syrian refugees (Pamuk & Baczynska, 2016). The stance of Hungary, the EU-Turkey deal, and the U.S. state-level refusal all indicate increased hostility toward Syrian refugees.

Understanding the political, institutional, and cultural context surrounding the Syrian refugee crisis is significant for underscoring the co-constitutive nature of news frames and broader social dynamics. By highlighting some of the key trends and details surrounding the crisis, a more intricate picture is painted for how and why certain news frames are rendered important within a given sociopolitical context. By attending to the details of how the crisis is unfolding, we are able to better assess how news frames and macro political dynamics co-construct notions of reality.

### **Framing Analysis**

The public understanding of the Syrian crisis around the world is guided mainly by news frames. Framing is a way of classifying and categorizing information that allows audiences to make sense of and give meaning to the world around them (Goffman, 1974). Entman (1993) has defined framing as “making some aspects of reality more salient in a text in order to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). Frames serve as metacommunicative structures that use reasoning devices such as metaphors, lexical choices, images, symbols, and actors to evoke a latent message for media users (Gamson, 1995). Previous research has distinguished issue-specific frames from generic frames that relate to structural features—such as conflict, human interest, morality, economics, and responsibility—that can be applied across topics and issues (De Vreese, 2005; Elsamni, 2016; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

At the individual level, frames influence how audiences attend to, interpret, remember, evaluate, and respond to such issues; at the societal level, frames can shape public opinions and policies (De Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993; Scheckele, 2000). Media frames provide subtle cues using visual and verbal/textual devices that facilitate certain causal interpretations over others (Entman, 1993; Gilens, 1996; Iyengar, 1990). They activate related thoughts, feelings, and concepts through the cognitive networks of association (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Davies, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2004). The aspects of reality that are selected, organized, and emphasized by media influence audience perceptions of the issue, the key actors, and the possible solutions to social issues (De Vreese, Jochen, & Semetko, 2001). Media frames have agenda-setting power to shape public discourse on social issues by promoting specific interpretations and opinions of public policies by cueing in particular considerations (De Vreese et al., 2001; Entman, 1993). The construction of frames is influenced by several factors such as journalists’ personal biases, organizational structures and practices, media routines, cultural orientation, and geopolitical issues (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

### Comparative News Framing of Crises

Comparative framing analysis examines differences in news frames of the same issue from various cultural perspectives and ideologies (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; Fahmy, 2010; Ravi, 2005). Even within the same language, newspaper coverage of important issues can vary based on the paper's political orientation and ownership. Although a range of topics, issues, and frames are depicted in traditional Arabic news sources, some of the common ones relate to crises, conflicts, and politics. Political news stories, especially those relevant to pan-Arab interests such as civil unrest, are popular and serve as key gatekeepers in influencing political agenda in the region (Ayish, 2002).

Research on comparative framing analysis of crises and conflicts has demonstrated distinct differences in the frames emphasized by English versus Arabic news sources (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; Fahmy, 2010; Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011). For instance, Al Jazeera English was much more likely than Al Jazeera Arabic to carry news stories about the U.S-led coalition against Al-Qaeda as lead stories and front-page news (Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011). Fahmy's (2010) visual analysis of photographs about the 9/11 attack and the Afghan War reveals that the English newspaper *International Herald Tribune* focused more on human suffering and patriotism, while the Arabic newspaper *Al-Hayat* focused on material loss, antiwar frames, and humanizing the war victims. Portrayals of the Iraq War in English news sources (*The New York Times* and *The Guardian*) emphasized the rebuilding of Iraq, while Arabic newspapers (*Al Jazeera* and *Al Ahram*) focused on war, conflict, and violence frames (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007). The following frames emerged from the analysis by Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007): war-related, violence, human interest, diagnostic war, prognostic war, antiwar protests, oil resources, media self-referential, looting, responsibility, and rebuilding frames.

### Framing of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in News Media

Shifting our attention to the framing of refugees in the news, previous research has found that frames can serve to humanize refugees or portray them as collective threats to security and values (Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchinson, & Nicholson, 2013; Bozdog and Smets, 2017; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013). Two of the dominant frames in such analyses are the victim frame and the intruder frame (Horsti, 2008; van Gorp, 2005). Refugees are framed as helpless and passive victims of persecution in their homeland who need to be saved by democratic nations through their flexible asylum policies. In contrast, the intruder frame presents refugees as active adventure seekers engaged in criminal and illegal activities posing a threat to the cultural, economic, and security needs of the host country. The victim and intruder frames work together to create a combination of feelings of pity and hostility, which contributes to the dehumanization of refugees (Esses et al., 2013).

Many studies of the Syrian refugee crisis have focused on visual imagery. Bleiker and colleagues (2013) note the absence of recognizable facial features in photographs of refugees in Australian news media. Such depersonalization was linked with framing the refugee crisis as a security threat. Similarly, Cmeciu (2017) examined 12 images used in the "Debating Europe" platform that deploy strategies such as blame shifting and emotional frames to legitimize the lack of global action. In addition, Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) find that CNN's visual reportage uses techniques such as close-up shots to emphasize the human-interest angle, whereas leading German newspaper *Der Spiegel* focuses on security and xenophobic frames. Some researchers have examined how the circulation of the photo of the dead Syrian child Aylan Kurdi through social media influenced

humanitarian action (Bozdag & Smets, 2017; van Schaik, 2015). Overall, these analyses of visual rhetoric find that photos about the Syrian refugee crisis in Western newspapers portrayed refugees in large groups, often emphasizing the children in the group, to draw attention to the issue.

Textual analysis of news framing of the Syrian refugee crisis unveils slightly different patterns. Dominant frames include attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality, and economic frames (Elsamni, 2016; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore (2015) find cross-national differences in framing such that newspapers in Sweden, Italy, and Spain present the crisis in a fairly positive manner, but those from Germany and the United Kingdom tend to reflect more polarization. A news analysis of Syrian fighters in The Netherlands and Flanders by Berbers and colleagues (2015) finds that the main frames used are the victim, terrorist, martyr, Don Quixote, and adventurer frames. In sum, research suggests that news media portray refugees through multiple frames that create empathy through a more human-interest angle or present refugees negatively as security threats.

Based on our understanding of the context of the Syrian refugee crisis and the review of relevant literature on the framing of crises and refugees, our article aims to understand how Arabic and English news sources frame the current Syrian refugee crisis. Specifically, we pose the following research questions:

*RQ1: What key frames emerge in portrayals of the Syrian refugee crisis in the news media?*

*RQ2: Do Arabic and English news sources differ in their framing of the Syrian refugee crisis?*

We expect Arabic and English news sources to frame the crisis differently, given how media often perform the function of mediators of power, hegemony, and culture (van Zoonen, 1994). This expectation does not assume culture or language as a wholly deterministic force in how the various news sources frame the crisis. Rather, the distinct frames found in Arabic and English news sources indicate how sociocultural and political positions are negotiated and realized through media. Media become avenues for negotiating, affirming, and challenging systems of domination. That is, communication and culture co-constitute phenomena that converge to inform how we understand our sociopolitical worlds (Shome & Hegde, 2002). As Anderson (2006) argues, media work through a shared language to construct (national) communities. For example, we expect English sources to reinforce the idea of the violent, Muslim Other and Arabic sources to humanize the crisis as a way of challenging essentialist frames. The differential framing might indicate how cultural and political lines are drawn to assert differences, thereby reinforcing systems of domination.

### **Method**

We conducted a content analysis of news stories on the Syrian refugee crisis to identify key frames in Arabic and English sources. The stories were randomly sampled from Arabic and English news stories published from March to June 2016.

#### ***Arabic and English News Sources***

Articles were sampled from seven English and 10 Arabic news sources (see Table 1 for the full list).

**Table 1. News Sources by Country and Ownership.**

News Source	Country	Ownership
<i>Al Alam</i>	Iran	Government
<i>Al Ahrām</i>	Egypt	Government
<i>Ad Dustour</i>	Jordan	Public
<i>Al Hayat</i>	United Kingdom	Private
<i>Al Manar</i>	Lebanon	Private
<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Qatar	Government
<i>Al Riyadh</i>	Saudi Arabia	Private
<i>Al Wahda Thawra</i>	Syria	Government
<i>El Nashra</i>	Lebanon	Private
Syrian Arab News Agency	Syria	Public
<i>BBC International</i>	United Kingdom	Public
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	United Kingdom	Private
<i>The Guardian</i>	United Kingdom	Private
NBC/MSNBC	United States	Private
<i>The New York Times</i>	United States	Private
<i>USA Today</i>	United States	Private
<i>The Washington Post</i>	United States	Private

The news outlets were selected based on their popularity. For the Arabic sample, we examined all 10 sources available via the Media Monitoring System, which includes popular blogs and websites beyond traditional newspapers. The Arabic news sources reflect the diversity of news sources based on their popularity and authority in the region. Top Arabic news sources from various countries were included: *Al Alam* (Iran), *Al Ahrām* (Egypt), *Ad Dustour* (Jordan), *Al Hayat* (United Kingdom), *Al Manar* (Lebanon), *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), *Al Riyadh* (Saudi Arabia), *Al Wahda Thawra* (Syria), *El Nashra* (Lebanon), and Syrian Arab News Agency. For the English news sources, we reviewed the Pew Research Center's top 20 list of online news entities in 2015 in the United States to select *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, NBC/MSNBC, and *USA Today*. *BBC International*, *The Guardian*, and *The Daily Mail* were selected from the United Kingdom.

For the English stories, we used the LexisNexis database to search for key terms of interest within our search period. Duplicate stories were removed from the sample. The Arabic news stories were compiled from the Media Monitoring System (MMS; see <http://mms.tamu.edu>). This system allows for analysis of newspapers and social media data in several languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, and Russian, that are generally not easily accessible to those not fluent in the languages. The system not only archives news stories from major news sources in these languages but also translates them into English in real time. News stories, broadcasts, and social media posts are gathered from newspapers, news channels, and social media platforms with high regional circulation and following. In addition to circulation, outlets representing a spectrum of ownership structure (i.e., private or public), political leaning, and geography are included. For example, Arabic-language outlets in the system span from Egypt to Saudi Arabia are both state-sponsored and privately owned and are characterized by critical/oppositional and pro-government outlets. The diversity of news sources included in MMS allows for a rich and broad representation of regional news outlets. The

translation software for MMS has been created, guided, and refined by native Arabic language speakers over several years.

### ***Sampling Time Frame***

The sampling period was from March 1 to June 30, 2016. During this period, key regional and world events directly impacted the plight of Syrian refugees. March 2016 was selected as the starting point, because it was at this time that the Germany-brokered European Union and Turkey deal regarding the "return" of refugees to Turkey was to be fully implemented. June 2016 was selected as a strategic end date because of the Brexit referendum vote, the bombing at Istanbul Ataturk Airport, and the end of the U.S. presidential primary election. All three of these events marked a contentious summer, with increased displacement of Syrians deployed as a rallying cry to increase border security and limit migration to the United States and the United Kingdom. Officials in the United Kingdom railed against EU immigration policies, citing concerns over national security and sovereignty. Similarly, in the United States, Donald Trump maintained his position on halting the acceptance of Syrian refugees throughout his presidential election campaign.

### ***Constructed-Week Sampling***

A constructed-week sample was created by downloading news stories that had any of the following search terms: *Syrian refugee*, *Syrian refugee crisis*, *Syrian migrant*, and *Syrian migrant crisis*. The various terms were selected based on geographic differences in terminology. From a preliminary analysis of English and Arabic articles, it became clear that *migrant* was a preferred term among UK sources. Once all the news stories were compiled, we arranged them by date and selected every third story for each news outlet by language. This systematic sampling procedure allowed us to obtain a representative sample of each of the news sources without having to analyze all the stories. It also allowed us to generalize the findings to the entire population of news stories published in Arabic and English during this period. A total of 1,807 stories were gathered: 1,020 Arabic articles and 787 English articles. Of these, the random sample generated 278 Arabic articles and 211 English articles.

### ***Analysis Procedures***

News stories were coded and analyzed using a mixed-methods software called MAXQDA. This approach was justified because the goal of the study was to develop an organic understanding and explore the major frames across news sources. The MAXQDA system generated word clouds by month and language to assess the frequency of various words and phrases among each language, month, and country. After word clouds were generated, Excel-formatted word frequency lists were created.

The word frequency lists reflected the word clouds but provided a more extensive list of common words, along with the numeric frequency of their appearance in the articles. To ensure that superfluous words and phrases were excluded from the analysis, MAXQDA-provided "stoplists" were used prior to cloud and frequency list generation. These stoplists included common articles and prepositions (i.e., *the*, *a*, *with*) and pronouns. Using the MAXQDA-generated word clouds and frequency list, we analyzed each list and cloud to assess the frequency and salience of different words and word clusters.

We independently analyzed the word clouds and word frequency lists to identify an initial set of frames based on patterns of word clusters. Frames were not determined based on a priori information. Instead of imposing generic or external frames on the data, frames were allowed to emerge from the data. We compared and discussed the preliminary frames through an iterative process to reach consensus on the final set of frames. For each distinct final frame, we went back to the stories a second time and used MAXQDA to search for and highlight news stories at the article level and at the sentence level. At the article level, this search helped establish how many news articles mentioned the frequently occurring words in each frame. At the sentence level, the MAXQDA system searched for and highlighted frequently occurring words with a setting of five words before and after the search term. The analyzed sentences allowed us to gain deeper insight into how words were used in different contexts. For each frame, we noted how many analyzed sentences mentioned the frequently occurring words in each frame. We subsequently read through analyzed sentences in each frame to pick out the best exemplars that contextualized and situated the frames in Arabic- and English-language news stories.

### **Analysis of Key News Frames**

To answer the first research question, we used framing theory to guide the analysis of news stories about the Syrian refugee crisis from Arabic and English news sources. Our analysis of the news stories revealed four main frames: border, institutional, victim, and war. The border frame included words such as *Turkey*, *Europe*, *Arab*, *United States*, and *Jordan*. The institutional frame included *council*, *government*, *minister*, and *union*. The victim frame encompassed words such as *children*, *people*, *migrants*, and *refugees*. The war frame included *security*, *terrorism*, *war*, and *military*. The following sections provide a brief overview of each frame, analysis at the article level and sentence level for each frame, and snippets from stories that use each frame.

#### ***Border Frame***

The border frame is constitutive of space, national borders, ethnicity, religious identity, and language. This frame was characterized by a focus on physical spaces in relation to cultural and political identities and institutions. The border frame was used in 453 articles (25.1%). Of these, 42.4% mentioned Turkey, 53.6% mentioned Europe, 30.0% mentioned the United States, 22.9% mentioned Jordan, and 19.2% mentioned Lebanon. Similarly, of the 7,695 sentences that used this frame, 23.6% mentioned Turkey; Europe, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United States also occurred often. The articles in this frame highlight an emphasis on the flow of refugees, placement, and regional political relations. The following quotes are representative examples of this frame:

[Bibi] said that Jordan should not bear the responsibility of hosting refugees alone and the [United] States [should] play its role in shouldering its responsibilities to relieve Jordan, whether to support development projects, or consider the possibility of calculating these loans from international institutions or donor countries to grant to Jordan, as well as to facilitate an agent of the entry of Jordanian goods to the European Union market. (*Ad Dustour*, March 28, 2016, para. 14).



Days after he signed the order, Brownback got a response in the form of a letter signed by Secretary of State John Kerry and Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson. In the five-page letter, the two senior officials laid forth the procedures and security checks conducted before a refugee is allowed to relocate to the United States. (*The Washington Post*, April 27, 2016, para. 11)

### ***Institutional Frame***

The institutional frame identified issues related to governments, institutional bodies, political parties, elections, and politicians. The border frame also references institutions, but the institutional frame is distinct in that it solely refers to abstract governing and political bodies without reference to physical geography and/or culture. A total of 408 articles (22.6%) used the institutional frame. Some 60.7% of these articles mentioned *government*, 52.9% mentioned *president*, 47.1% mentioned *political*, and 9.8% mentioned *Trump*. Of the total 3,433 sentences that fit this frame, 18.6% mentioned *government*, 15.8% mentioned *president*, 13.4% mentioned *political*, and 12.8% mentioned *Trump*. The articles and subsequent coded segments in this frame indicate an emphasis on the political and policy implications and dynamics of the Syrian refugee crisis. Many of the articles focus on the role of institutions in either mitigating or worsening the crisis and the subsequent impact changes in leadership and elections are having on this crisis. Indeed, the U.S. presidential election, particularly the Trump candidacy, dominates the political and institutional framings of the articles. Below are some examples from this frame:

[Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants Nasser Joudah] stressed that Jordan stands [at] the forefront of international efforts to combat violent extremism and terrorism, pointing out that Jordan . . . has continued its participation in the war on terrorism to defend the principles and values of Islam, confirming the intention of Jordan firmly and with full force to address the threat to the social fabric and the abduction of the Islamic religion. (*Ad Dustour*, March 28, 2016, para. 18)

The Dutch EU Council Presidency is seeking to implement the refugee deal also on the part of the EU. At the meeting of the interior ministers, it wants to oblige a majority of countries to take over Syrian refugees from Turkey within the framework of the so-called one-for-one deal. "This is an act of despair because far too few EU countries have so far expressed their willingness to take over Syrians from Turkey in the near term," said a diplomat. (*BBC World News*, April 19, 2016, para. 5)

### ***War Frame***

The war frame addresses notions of national sovereignty, safety, war, geopolitical threats, and military bodies, whether nationally sponsored or nonstate. A total 476 articles (26.3%) used the war frame. A full 23.7% of these articles mentioned *terrorism*, 33.8% mentioned *security*, 41.2% mentioned *war*, and 22.9% mentioned *forces*. Of the 2,516 sentences that used the war frame, 23.5% mentioned *terrorism*, 22.2% mentioned *security*, 17.8% mentioned *war*, and 16.4% mentioned *forces*. The articles that used a war frame focused on the human cost and toll of increased violence and the influx of refugees

from Syria into Europe, the United States, and neighboring countries in the Middle East. In sum, the articles using this frame presented the crisis in relation to domestic, regional, and global concerns over violence and humanitarianism issues, citing regional political instability, the worsening conflict, political alliances, and the threat of terrorism from DAESH.<sup>2</sup> Below are representative examples:

The President of the U.S. House of Representatives . . . pointed out that his visit to Jordan and the delegation comes to emphasize the importance of the partnership between the two countries and what can be done to help Jordan to overcome the effects of the refugee crisis as well as the efforts of Veteran Syrian terrorism. (*Ad Dustour*, April 6, 2016, para. 14)

Kurzman published a study in February that counted 81 American Muslims being involved in extremist plots in 2015, the highest number in any year since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. A majority of those individuals either traveled to Syria, or sought to travel there, to join militant groups. Since 9/11, the study found, a total of 344 American Muslims had been involved in extremist plots, half of them involving targets overseas, and 40 percent here at home (*The Washington Post*, June 15, 2016, para. 21)

### **Victim Frame**

Last, the victim frame addresses issues related to personal and emotional aspects of the crisis, touching on notions of people, emotions, hardship, and even success in escaping the crisis. It emphasizes the helplessness of the people affected by the crisis, noting the need for humanitarian and institutional intervention. This frame focused on people and their personal stories. A total of 469 articles (25.9%) used the victim frame. More than three-quarters (76.8%) of them mentioned *refugees*, 71.0% mentioned *people*, 31.3% mentioned *children*, and 40.9% mentioned *support*. Of the 7,025 sentences that used this frame, 25.2% mentioned *refugees*, 16.0% mentioned *people*, 6.6% mentioned *children*, and 6.3% mentioned *support*. News stories that used a victim frame emphasized the personal hardships and successes of Syrian refugees as they attempt to flee the Syrian civil war. They emphasized emotional and personal narratives and stories to underscore the plight of those escaping the conflict. Many articles in this frame positioned refugees as helpless or in need of help, noting strategies, policies, and organizational efforts that either improve or worsen the conditions of those affected by the crisis. Overall, the victim frame positions refugees as passive and in need of assistance. The following excerpts are representative examples:

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<sup>2</sup> DAESH is an abbreviation of the Islamic State's Arabic name: Dawlat al-Islamiyah f'al-Iraq w Belaad al-Sham. This acronym is also reminiscent of an Arabic word meaning to "trample" or "crush." Many have begun using the term DAESH instead of ISIS or ISIL to resist the association of the terrorist organization with Islam (Silverstein, 2015). In keeping with this trend and given the YPJ's (Women's Protection Units - the homegrown defense forces of the Kurdish area of Syria) use of the term, we will also use the acronym DAESH.

On his part, said the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi, living conditions in the States neighbouring Syria, "becoming increasingly difficult." He said that about 90 percent of the Syrian refugees are living below the poverty threshold and 10 percent of them at least consider "in very poor conditions," he said, adding: "We cannot face of a refugee crisis comprehensive through closing the doors and building walls," in a reference to the agreement signed between the European Union and Turkey on new immigrants arriving in Greece. (*Al Hayat*, March 31, 2016, para. 6)

James Brokenshire, a Home Office minister, said the government could not support a policy that would "inadvertently create a situation in which families see an advantage in sending children alone ahead and in the hands of traffickers, putting their lives at risk by attempting treacherous sea crossings to Europe which would be the worst of all outcomes." (*The Guardian*, April 25, 2016, para. 6)

### **Analysis of Patterns: Arabic Versus English News Sources**

To address the second research question, we compared news frames in Arabic and English news sources. The analysis suggests that English-language news stories typically framed the Syrian refugee crisis around domestic political, cultural, and economic concerns. Arabic language articles also focused on regional and global political dynamics and trends but more so on the implications of war and conflict for the personal and humanitarian conditions faced by Syrian refugees as people. This is not to imply that Arabic-language articles were not concerned about or neglected domestic political concerns but that, in general, articles were framed more from a human interest perspective in terms of the consequences of war and geographical borders. As suggested by previous framing research, this finding has implications for how the refugee crisis is framed in terms of key actors, how the crisis is defined, and how responsibility is attributed for the crisis (De Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993; Gilens, 1996; Iyengar, 1990; Scheffele, 2000). Moreover, this suggests how culture, politics, and geographic lines are affirmed and reinforced through the distinct linguistic news frames.

The type of news source (English or Arabic) had an effect on the percentage of coded segments for each of the frames ( $\chi^2 = 194.4$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The border frame (English 35.9% versus Arabic 38.32%) and the institutional frame (English 17.8% versus Arabic 15.66%) did not exhibit significant differences, but the victim frame was more often featured in English sources (37.19%) than in Arabic sources (31.5%), and the war frame was much more likely to appear in Arabic sources (14.6%) than in English sources (9.14%).

It is important to keep in mind that many articles and sentences fell under multiple frames, indicating that different news stories framed and approached the Syrian refugee crisis from multiple perspectives. While these framings are not mutually exclusive, the results indicate distinctions between the dominance of certain frames based on the language of the story. Arabic articles were marked by phrasing such as *Syrian refugee*, *crisis*, *people*, and *Syria*. U.S.-based English articles tended to words such as *Turkey*, *EU*, *Europe*, and *Trump*. U.K.-based English articles were marked by words such as *Turkey*, *EU*, *Syria*, and *refugees*.

It is evident from our analysis that English articles were indicative of geographical and political framings that emphasized refugees as victims in need of help, whereas Arabic articles emphasized the conflict in Syria in terms of a crisis and the people affected by the conflict on the ground. Arabic articles often deployed humanitarian framings, emphasizing the crisis in terms of the plight of Syrian refugees and civilians, referencing how security and military forces either ameliorated or worsened the situation of local and displaced people. For example, an article from *Al Jazeera* described the civilian impact of ongoing violence, noting how oppositional military forces contribute to this situation: "The correspondent added that also wounded civilians were killed as a result of artillery bombardment of the forces of order targeted several towns in the area of Lawn, which is controlled by the armed opposition [in] Damascus East [sic]" (*Al Jazeera*, May 6, 2016, para. 10).

Other Arabic articles similarly express the Syrian refugee crisis in terms of how concerns for security or military advantage impacted local communities and populations and refugees. "The Syrian regime forces bombard Al-Yarmouk camp [with] explosive barrels. . . . Al-Yarmuk Palestinian refugee camp, south of the Syrian capital Damascus, is located under the siege of those forces since a long period of time" (*Al Jazeera*, June 20, 2016, para. 1). "5 martyrs and 21 people were injured in an attack the terrorist groups by rocket-propelled grenades, bullets and explosive sniper bullets on residential districts in the city of Aleppo, in violation of a new today an Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities" (Syrian Arab News Agency, June 11, 2016, para. 2).

English articles framed the crisis much more in terms of refugees as victims in the context of geographical and political instability. Refugees were depicted as indistinguishable "masses" and "millions" of bodies in need of food and shelter without much agency or freedom.

Thousands of Syrian refugees have ended up in limbo. Those in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey find themselves increasingly unwelcome in countries overburdened with refugees. Many give up on their applications, joining the huge flow of people risking their lives to travel to Europe or even back to Syria. (*The Washington Post*, March 13, 2016, para. 9)

The minor, who cannot be named, travelled through 17 countries from Syria before reaching Calais and then the UK. Speaking through an interpreter, he said: "Most of the children in the camps do have their families and parents with them but those stranded around Europe and in Calais are very vulnerable because other people could do something to them. That is the fundamental difference between the children in Europe and those in the camps." At least 95,000 unaccompanied child refugees are estimated to have applied for asylum in Europe last year. Europol, the EU's criminal intelligence agency, estimated in January that 10,000 children had gone missing after arriving in Europe, warning that many had been taken by criminal gangs. (*The Guardian*, April 25, 2016, para. 18)

Arabic articles framed and referenced regional, geographic, and other cultural dynamics as worsening the conditions of Syrian refugees. "According to a report published by the British Oxfam

organization Tuesday non-governmental, rich countries no longer the resettlement [*sic*] of more than 67 thousand Syrian refugees, or 1.39 percent of the total number of refugees" (*Al-Hayat*, March 31, 2016, para. 3).

Turkey is trying, which hosts more than 2.6 million Syrian refugees, to keep the latest wave of refugees on the Syrian side of the border, for several reasons, including pressure on Russia, to stop its support to Al-Assad forces near the city of Aleppo, which threatens the flow of hundreds of thousands of refugees to its borders. (*Al-Hayat*, April 27, 2016, para. 10)

English-language publications also focused on implications for domestic and world politics, policies, and geopolitical issues. Many articles discussed what the crisis implied for local elections, national security, and regional political aims and interests. For example, U.S. articles frequently discussed the crisis in terms of U.S. national security and the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Indeed, many articles frequently referenced Donald Trump's rhetoric and its implications for domestic U.S. political dynamics: "Mr. Trump claimed Mrs. Clinton's immigration policies would open the floodgates to jihadists, pointing to her plan to increase the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the country by 550 percent over President Obama's plan" (*The New York Times*, June 15, 2016, para. 3).

Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric has ranged widely: He has long stoked the idea that Obama might be a secret follower of Islam. Two months before proposing the Muslim ban, Trump announced he would kick all Syrian refugees out of the country and bar any others from coming in because they could be a "Trojan horse." Trump also suggested killing the innocent relatives of terrorists. (*The Washington Post*, June 21, 2016, para. 1)

UK news articles such as this example from *The Guardian* frequently framed the crisis in light of the impending Brexit referendum, positioning the crisis around economics and immigration policy:

Nor is Brexit likely to lead to big cuts in legal migration either. Over half of migration comes from outside the EU. Johnson has promised access to the single market and a good trade deal—so given Europe's current rules; we are most likely to end up like Norway or Switzerland, with little change to immigration after all. Because if they don't do a good trade deal, the impact on jobs and growth would be disastrous. (*The Guardian*, June 14, 2016, para. 8)

Although both Arabic and English sources use the border frame extensively, analyzing excerpts is important for situating and contextualizing these patterns. Indeed, as the previous discussion demonstrates, the various frames are not mutually exclusive and often work conjunctively. The stories indicate that, while certain frames may dominate, their deployment must be understood through a deeper analysis of the context to glean how a focus on culture or geography is informed by concerns for border and national security, for example. Language and geography are interlinked from the vantage point of the different news frames. That is not to suggest a natural link between language and

geographical location, but that news media referee these connections through the ways they represent the crisis. Overall, the analysis reveals that Arabic sources formulate the crisis in terms of the impact of ongoing violence on the people in Syria. They focus on the physical impact of the conflict, highlighting stories and cases that underscore the devastation that has become a facet of daily life in Syria. Moreover, these frames highlight the violence by reiterating the human toll of colonialism and nearly incessant global conflict, emphasizing how other actors and players either ameliorate or exacerbate the destruction.

### **Discussion**

The border, institutional, war, and victim frames that are unveiled in our study are similar to those found in analyses relating to the human suffering in times of war and conflicts such as during the Al-Qaeda/U.S. conflict and the Iraq War (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007; Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011). This study adds to scholarship on the coverage of refugee stories in general, which bring an emotional or individual perspective while presenting an issue or event by personalizing it (Elsamni, 2016; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Research suggests that such frames often use anecdotal case study approaches that focus on individual refugees to generate emotional responses to the stories, which can reinforce images of refugees as helpless victims and attribute responsibility for the crisis on internal/individual causes rather than external/societal ones (Gilens, 1996; Iyengar, 1990; Steimel, 2010). The Arabic articles' focus on the crisis from an emotional and humanitarian framework suggests that these humanizing frames might operate as a symbolic resistance to the ways in which dominant, external forces have characterized and influenced the region. For example, how might the focus on the refugees as people, living among constant physical devastation, push against the grain of broader, global characterizations of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis from a realist, political perspective?

Frames from English sources represent refugees as victims, noting their helplessness and the obstacles they face in seeking asylum. While these frames certainly underscore the emotional and physical impact of the crisis on people, these stories also situate refugees as passive and in need of saving. These sorts of references to victimhood and victimization, while drawing attention to a desperate situation, simultaneously create a sociocultural hierarchy between the victim (Syrian refugee) and potential savior (i.e., Western host country). The geographic and cultural orientation of these frames reveals that the mainstream media have become nodes through which political and cultural discourses are addressed and represented. The worsening refugee crisis points to how national and cultural identities are being questioned and even potentially challenged as bodies flow across borders. For example, referring to the refugees as passive, helpless victims reaffirms the narrative of the West as powerful, active, and in control of global politics and culture. This frame serves to remedy or address anxieties as political control and influence shift. Indeed, the very movement of these people suggests a porousness and permeability of borders, rendering physical notions of the nation as tenuous and arbitrary. Additionally, regional and global alliances are being tested and revised as old political hierarchies resurface. From a critical geopolitical perspective, these frames then serve as public diplomacy tools for the West to maintain status quo through what Pamment (2014) refers to as "discursive spatializations."

Although an increasing effort is under way to expand the reach of news media by making them available in different languages and to various parts of the world, there continues to be a need for greater access to news stories from a diversity of sources from around the world that offer alternative perspectives on important global issues such as forced migration, natural disasters, war/conflict, and climate change. Such access is important because the public relies heavily on mediated images to learn about global issues.

Although this study provides broad strokes in terms of overall portrayals of the refugee crisis, further in-depth analysis is needed to understand the finer shades of distinct frames that might vary by the news sources' country of origin, ownership, and political affiliation. For example, future research could examine the distribution among frames across specific outlets and regions based on source ownership (private, public, or government-owned). Differences in Arabic versus English papers are not only based on language but also due to distinct differences in news routines, information-gathering techniques, access to technology, gatekeeping, editorial policies, and localized knowledge based on cultural proximity. This refined lens would further provide a means to examine the interplay between geography, politics, and language on news framing at the institutional and practice-based level.

Future research on how frames overlap and vary within specific institutions and within individual articles would highlight how distinct news frames may work conjunctively to craft messages. Additionally, it would be helpful to expand the scope of the sampling frame to a longer time period to record differences in framing both temporally and spatially. Methodologically, this study's use of computer-assisted coding of textual information could be enhanced in future research by using qualitative analyses with human coding of both visuals and texts.

This study offers a beginning conceptualization of how geography and sociocultural and political dynamics influence the representation and framing of global humanitarian crises, such as the Syrian refugee crisis, in relation to local concerns and interests. It addresses how media framing is contextually influenced by geographic, political, and cultural position. Indeed, this study provides a glimpse into how broader regional entities and dynamics influence news frames and suggests that media messages are not isolated but intertwined with and influenced by the spaces and contexts in which they operate.

Bearing in mind Anderson's (2006) formulation of the relationship between media, culture, and language in fostering a sense of community, this study highlights how the framing of the Syrian refugee crisis in news sources of different languages reflects processes of reinforcing boundaries. The differences between English and Arabic news sources suggest that the contextually contingent frameworks are not only reflections of local concerns but ways to reaffirm those geographical, cultural, and political contexts. Language, culture, and politics converge in the context of these news frames. The Syrian refugee crisis, in this sense, becomes a site for mediating and negotiating broader struggles over regional and global political positions. Our study suggests a further consideration of how humanitarian crises are circulated and framed within mediated texts and how this mediation speaks to negotiations of and challenges to sociocultural power.

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