

# **The Credibility of Transnational, English-Language News Media in the Middle East: from the Al Jazeera Effect, to the PressTV and the TRT World Effect?**

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## Abstract

Since its foundation in 1996, Al Jazeera and its English subsidiary Al Jazeera English, established in 2006, have revolutionized the Middle Eastern news media landscape by critically reporting on events in the immediate region and by emphasizing the experiences of people from the Global South. This led to the coining of the term ‘the Al Jazeera effect’ by Philip Seib. However, the only directive issued by its main sponsor, the Qatari government, is that it should not put the monarchy in a negative light. While different countries in the Middle East have begun following Qatar’s footsteps by establishing English-language news media of their own, an issue that is materializing in parallel is the worldwide declining trust in the news media. As various news networks around the globe are seeing their credibility—the quality of being trusted—questioned, this thesis ties these two developments together by asking how Al Jazeera English, as well as two of its English-language competitors in the region, being PressTV from Iran and TRT World from Turkey, go about establishing their credibility. More particularly, how do these three networks fare when they report on a conflict in their proverbial backyard, the Syrian Civil War, the outcome of which concerns Qatar, Iran, and Turkey alike? By borrowing from the existing scholarly literature on the analysis of news media credibility, this thesis looks at YouTube material on the Syrian Civil War in the first five months of 2019 from the flagship current affairs discussion program on each network, *Inside Story* on Al Jazeera English, *The Debate* on PressTV, and *The Newsmakers* on TRT World in order to demonstrate whether the latter two networks cater for their own ‘effect’ in the Middle Eastern news media arena. Moreover, this thesis hopes to expand our understanding of how we should view the three news outlets: as critical watchdogs of political institutions, or as mouthpieces for their respective governments.

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## I. Introduction

In Western democracies, the role of the news media vis-à-vis the political scene has become controversial in recent years; one need to only think of the ‘fake news’ epithet that has entered the jargon of media evaluation ever since Donald Trump became president of the United States in 2017. Media theory holds that within democratic regimes like the United States, “media are perceived both positively (as democratic sources of truth) and negatively (as powerful manipulators of truth).”<sup>1</sup> Assuming either role will have consequences for their journalistic credibility—the quality of being trusted and believed in—as perceptions of media serving as democratic sources of truth go hand in hand with a high credibility score, and vice versa. Another important characteristic of the media in democratic regimes is that they can operate independently; their editorial policies are not determined by the national authorities. In contrast, in countries beyond the West, where the media are wholly controlled, such as in China, or partially controlled, such as in Thailand, by the government, their function takes on the attributes of a tool of propaganda and social control.<sup>2</sup>

Based on this, it is possible to create a hypothetical spectrum of credibility, where the media in a given country serve as a watchdog of democratic institutions on one end, and as propaganda tools and influencers of public opinion on the other end. Such a spectrum is particularly important to consider in light of the proliferation of satellite news channels over the past twenty-five years. Channels such as the Qatari outlet Al Jazeera English, and its competitors PressTV from Iran, and TRT World from Turkey are growing in popularity, while each of them operate in countries where the governments in question strongly substantiate their financials and where the free press is not per se a common good. The addition of these two pieces of information might lead one to presume that these three networks end up on the ‘propaganda tool’ end of the credibility spectrum, but this would be at odds with their aforementioned growing popularity—after all, why would viewers seeking English-language news on the Middle East tune into a channel whose sole purpose is to be a proponent

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Laughey, “What Is Media Theory?”, in *Key Themes in Media Theory* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

of Qatari or Iranian or Turkish Middle East policy? The study of this paradox as it relates to the accumulation of the three networks' credibility on a topic that concerns all three host nations involved is the focal point of this thesis. Consequently, the research question is as follows: **How do state-supported, English-language televised news media in Qatar, Iran, and Turkey establish their credibility with regards to regional conflicts, specifically the Syrian Civil War?** This principal research question will be tackled by observing video material on the Syrian Civil War in 2019 from the flagship news discussion show on each network, being *Inside Story* on Al Jazeera English, *The Debate* on PressTV, and *The Newsmakers* on TRT World. The mission and vision statements of each news network will be detailed and analyzed in the first empirical chapter in order to get a view on how the networks themselves perceive their role in the global media landscape and thus how they aim to go about building credible news stories. In the second and third empirical chapters, the observations from the news discussion shows will be compared with these mission statements in mind, while analysis will also be devoted to if, and how these networks can frame the discussions on the Syrian Civil War by the manner in which they portray the role of their respective host countries, Qatar, Iran, and Turkey.

The Qatari state-owned broadcaster Al Jazeera is one of the best examples of the globalizing trend in the field of satellite television. Starting out in 1996 as a news channel broadcasting in Arabic, it quickly “won many viewers in the region” for its coverage of the United States’ war in Iraq and for its pro-Palestinian coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict. At the same time, this has also led to clashes with Western governments, but these clashes have not inhibited other countries from starting to use Al Jazeera footage as a news source.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in academic circles, the growing popularity of Al Jazeera has led to the coining of the term ‘Al Jazeera effect’ by Philip Seib, which describes one of the channel’s strengths as the injection of “‘contentious debate into an Arab news business that was previously known for its drab docility”” and as such, the Al Jazeera effect “is about the disruptive

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<sup>3</sup> Mirza Jan, “Globalization of Media: Key Issues and Dimensions”, *European Journal of Scientific Research* 29, no. 1 (2009): 70.

power of a more greatly distributed media ecosystem in the political realm.”<sup>4</sup> Seib based the Al Jazeera effect on the CNN effect, “which asserted that media coverage of overseas events or issues could compel governments to act, leading to less governmental autonomy in foreign policy.”<sup>5</sup> Since 1996, the popularity of Al Jazeera has grown significantly; according to its own estimation in 2012, the network broadcasted “to more than 220 million households in more than 100 countries.”<sup>6</sup> In 2006, Al Jazeera established an English-language channel, Al Jazeera English, with which it started to attract a more global audience; the newscasts from this subsidiary undoubtedly represent an important contribution to the 220 million households figure. Al Jazeera was thus the first network based in the Middle East to start producing newscasts in English<sup>7</sup> for audiences the world over, in an attempt to “penetrate a global English-language news market saturated with powerful players like the venerable BBC, CNN, and Sky News.”<sup>8</sup> Roughly during this time period, the Middle East saw the rise of several competitors vying with Al Jazeera for dominance of this global English-language news market. Two of these will also be studied in this thesis in a comparative manner in conjunction with Al Jazeera English, namely the Iranian-owned channel PressTV, founded in 2007, and the international branch of Turkey’s national public broadcaster Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, called TRT World, which was founded only recently in 2015. Both of these channels have, since their foundation, seen an upward trend in their international reach, as well as a continued likening to the work of BBC World News and CNN International, very much in the same vein as Al Jazeera English when it was the first English-language Middle Eastern news network to wander on this path.<sup>9 10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William Youmans, “The Al Jazeera Effect”, in *Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*, ed. Kerric Harvey (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Facts and Figures”, *Al Jazeera*, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/aboutus/2010/11/20101110131438787482.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Krane, “Al-Jazeera Says Its English-Language News Channel Will Launch Nov. 15”, *The Post-Star*, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZTgayH>.

<sup>8</sup> Marwan M. Kraidy, “Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English: a Comparative Institutional Analysis”, in *Kuala Lumpur Calling: Al-Jazeera English in Asia*, ed. Michael Kugelman (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2008), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Haider Rizvi, “Media: Foreign News Channels Drawing US Viewers”, *Inter Press Service*, accessed June 30, 2019, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2010/01/media-foreign-news-channels-drawing-us-viewers/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Turkish News Channel Expands Its Reach”, *Digital Studio Middle East*, accessed June 30, 2019, <https://www.digitalstudiome.com/article-10651-turkish-news-channel-expands-its-reach>.

With the English-language content they produce, Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World all aspire to be the most authoritative source of news on the multitude of events and conflicts happening in their regional environment to a global audience, as the discussion of their mission and vision statements will show. The manner in which said global news audiences are accustomed to the work and reports of international news channels is based on the trust these viewers place in the broadcasters' independence—at the very least, this is the case for the BBC<sup>11</sup> and CNN.<sup>12</sup> While BBC is publicly owned, its independence is strongly valued by the government: “At more reflective times politicians recognize that a BBC under direct government control would not only lose its prestige but also be mistrusted by the public as a source of nothing but propaganda.”<sup>13</sup>

If we look at the Middle East and specifically the countries under study here, being Qatar, Iran, and Turkey, a different picture emerges. Reporters Without Borders publishes the Press Freedom Index on an annual basis, where one of the criteria is ‘media independence’: “the degree to which the media are able to function independently of sources of political, governmental, business, and religious power and influence.”<sup>14</sup> In the compiled index for 2019 where countries are scored from 0 denoting the best possible situation for the press and 100 the worst, the following data is available: the United Kingdom and the United States score 22.23 and 25.69, respectively, whereas Qatar, Iran, and Turkey score 42.51, 64.41, and 52.81, respectively.<sup>15</sup> While the Press Freedom Index assesses the press situation in a country as a whole, the international news networks that are being studied in this thesis maintain, each in their own way, a close relation with their individual governments. Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World are all state-owned or state-supported to some extent, with the former calling itself a private corporation serving the public interest<sup>16</sup> where a member of Qatar’s

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<sup>11</sup> “Learn How the BBC Is Working to Strengthen Trust and Transparency in Online News”, *BBC News*, accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/help-41670342>.

<sup>12</sup> Katie Glaeser and Emily Smith, “Locating Sources and Fact-Checking”, *CNN*, accessed June 26, 2019, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/IREPORT/08/22/sources.boot.camp.irpt/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> “Editorial: Saving the BBC’s Credibility”, *British Journalism Review* 14, no. 4 (2003): 6.

<sup>14</sup> “2019 World Press Freedom Index—Detailed Methodology”, *Reporters Without Borders*, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/detailed-methodology>.

<sup>15</sup> “2019 World Press Freedom Index—Index Details”, *Reporters Without Borders*, accessed April 25, 2019, [https://rsf.org/en/ranking\\_table](https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table).

<sup>16</sup> “Who We Are”, *Al Jazeera*, accessed June 4, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/aboutus/>.

royal family serves as the chairman, and with the latter two being one hundred percent owned by their individual authorities. By virtue of this fact, they receive most, if not all of their funding from their host nations, possibly resulting in some red flags surrounding the journalistic independence of their reporting. Again, BBC World News is also a publicly owned network, but the fact that Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World reside in countries that score relatively poor on the Press Freedom Index is an extra reason for concern with regards to their journalistic credibility.

In the case of Al Jazeera English, questions on its independence from the Qatari government were raised following a news item in 2012, where a report on a debate at the United Nations on the Syrian Civil War starting out with comments from former president of the United States Barack Obama had to be re-edited so that it would commence with comments on the matter from Qatar's emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. "Despite protests from staff that the emir's comments—a repetition of previous calls for Arab intervention in Syria—were not the most important aspect of the UN debate, the two-minute video was re-edited and Obama's speech was relegated to the end of the package."<sup>17</sup> This act naturally had a damaging effect on Al Jazeera's credibility, and falls in line with the questions which have been raised by commentators and blog writers in the Arab world on the channel's independence, especially concerning reports on the revolutions of the Arab Spring. These critical voices serve to counterbalance the praise that Al Jazeera has also accumulated for being a 'voice for the voiceless', to quote the network's goal, that devotes most of its attention to the Global South.<sup>18</sup> In this light, the geopolitical ramifications of the relationship between Al Jazeera and the Qatari government are also important to consider. Saudi Arabia and Qatar went head to head only recently in a diplomatic crisis in 2017. One of the demands of the Saudi kingdom in order to mend the relations was that Qatar would agree to shut down Al Jazeera,<sup>19</sup> a severe demand even though it

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<sup>17</sup> Dan Sabbagh, "Al-Jazeera's Political Independence Questioned Amid Qatar Intervention", *The Guardian*, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/sep/30/al-jazeera-independence-questioned-qatar>.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, "Al-Jazeera TV Network Draws Criticism, Praise for Coverage of Arab Revolutions", *The Washington Post*, accessed June 30, 2019, <https://wapo.st/2ZqeAHL>.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Ponniah, "Qatar Crisis: Can Al Jazeera Survive?" *BBC News*, accessed April 11, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40187414>.

was aimed at the Arabic-language section of the network. This only reaffirms the view that media networks, besides being a means to spread information across the region and beyond, are also powerful geopolitical tools, given that Saudi Arabia sees the existence of Al Jazeera as a threat.<sup>20</sup>

That being said, this thesis aims to show that the work of the PressTV and TRT World, in addition to Al Jazeera English, also raises questions from time to time. The extent to which they are truly independent, along with the role they play in framing the debate on an issue that concerns all three countries involved, being the Syrian Civil War are two factors that feed into an assessment of how they establish their credibility. Such an assessment will assist us in further expanding our knowledge on where these growing Middle Eastern players fit in the normative framework of an increasingly internationalized news media landscape.

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<sup>20</sup> Amanda Erickson, “Why Saudi Arabia Hates Al Jazeera So Much”, *The Washington Post*, accessed June 30, 2019, <https://wapo.st/2PeAdXO>.

## II. Review of the academic literature

This chapter reviews the most important tenets of media theory, a look into how news consumers choose their sources, an evaluation of the notion of credibility and how this plays out in both Western and non-Western media environments, and lastly, the successes and failures of transnational news broadcasting in the Middle East and the role that credibility has played in these various attempts. The synthesis of these subtopics will show a solid theoretical underpinning of the current research project, but will also demonstrate that the comparative element, taking into account three transnational Middle Eastern broadcasters, is a formula that has not been tried yet. Therefore, it is the aim of this thesis to complement our understanding on the credibility of these networks through a comparative study of their operations.

### *Media theory*

The discipline of media theory, or media studies, is a broad field as analyses of the media borrow from many other academic disciplines, including but not limited to political science, communication studies, cultural studies, and psychology. One of the most renowned scholars of media theory is Marshall McLuhan, known for coining the phrase “the medium is the message”. This phrase should be read as a type of warning. McLuhan himself writes in his seminal work *Understanding Media*: “Indeed, it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium.”<sup>21</sup> It is often forgotten that ‘medium’ is the singular word associated with the plural ‘media’. In this sense, the media ought to be seen as “a multitude of cultural and communicative machines and processes that connect people, processes, institutions, meanings, and power in the material world.”<sup>22</sup> Another meaningful term conceived by McLuhan in *Understanding Media* is that of the ‘global village’. Commentators say that “McLuhan chose the insightful phrase

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<sup>21</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium Is the Message”, in *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man, Critical Edition*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Toby Miller and Marwan M. Kraidy, “Media Studies”, in *Global Media Studies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 16.

‘global village’ to highlight his observation that an electronic nervous system (the media) was rapidly integrating the planet—events in one part of the world could be experienced from other parts in real-time, which is what human experience was like when we lived in small villages.”<sup>23</sup> Back in the 1960s, McLuhan already prophesied that the way in which people around the world communicate with one another would be revolutionized with a tool along the lines of what would later be known as the World Wide Web. Within the field of international relations, it is commonly accepted that media is one of the main drivers of globalization.<sup>24</sup> International news networks are, after all, some of the paramount actors in this process, but all in all we thus see that viewing the media as a tool to enhance communication around the world is nothing new.

The information flowing from media theory as it is presented here is largely applicable to Western, democratic regimes. If we wish to transcribe this onto the media situation in the Middle East, we must, first and foremost, conclude from the outset that the three countries under study here each possess political systems that vary enormously in a comparative perspective. Qatar, for one, is a hereditary monarchy in which democratic elements only have a very limited presence. The case of Iran, being a theocratic republic is unique the world over. Here, democratic elections to choose the nation’s president do take place, but ultimate authority rests with the Supreme Leader, who is not democratically chosen. Lastly, Turkey is a secular republic with a functioning democratic system, but in recent years the democratic underpinnings of this system have been called into question.<sup>25</sup> Coupled with the three countries’ poor performance on the World Press Freedom Index referred to in the introduction, we might anticipate the Qatari, Iranian, and Turkish international news networks to veer more towards the ‘propaganda tool’ end of the news media evaluation spectrum, but the research below will have to prove whether this is actually the case. The audiences of the English-language reports of these broadcasters are predominantly located beyond the borders of the Middle East, so it

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<sup>23</sup> “Marshall McLuhan Predicts the Global Village”, *Living Internet*, accessed May 1, 2019, [http://livinginternet.com/i/ii\\_mcluhan.htm](http://livinginternet.com/i/ii_mcluhan.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Jack Lule, “Introduction: Global Village of Babel”, in *Globalization and Media: Global Village of Babel*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer McCoy, *et al.*, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (2018): 31-3.

could also be interesting to observe whether the tone and goal of their work for international audiences differs from reports watched by audiences within the immediate region in Arabic, Farsi, or Turkish. A comparison of credibility among Middle Eastern news media as broadcasted in English versus local languages is unfortunately beyond the scope and possibilities of the current research, but it could provide an interesting avenue for future studies.

### *How people choose what they want to watch*

One aspect related to the realm of media studies focuses on the psychological dimension of the field. Researchers have long pondered the question of how people choose what they want to watch in light of the fact that news consumers often watch news that aligns with their own political views: “News readers gorge on media messages that fit their pre-existing views, rather than graze on a wider range of perspectives. In other words, they consume what they agree with, researchers say.”<sup>26</sup> In academia, research has been done on the matter with regard to hotbed issues in, for example, the United States. Concerning nationwide views on climate change, for instance, “regular viewers of Fox News hear more dismissive arguments against anthropogenic climate change, and are less likely to accept its reality, compared to viewers of other networks.”<sup>27</sup> It ought to be remembered that the influence that news media, of a conservative character or otherwise, has on its viewers is a two-way street: as described above, viewers’ political opinions will indeed be impacted by that which they witness in the news, but tuning into these channels also reinforces what is called an ‘echo chamber’, where the news media serve as an amplifier of previously held beliefs.<sup>28</sup> As Bolin and Hamilton conclude following their study on views on climate change: “Communication processes such as selective exposure, elite cues, and reinforcing spirals allow biased information sources to amplify

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<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Hsu, “People Choose News That Fits Their Views”, *Live Science*, accessed April 28, 2019, <https://www.livescience.com/3640-people-choose-news-fits-views.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Jessica L. Bolin and Lawrence C. Hamilton, “The News You Choose: News Media Preferences Amplify Views on Climate Change”, *Environmental Politics* 27, no. 3 (2018): 459.

<sup>28</sup> Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, “Getting the Word Out: the Media as Cheerleader and Megaphone”, in *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123.

ideology-based differences, attenuating the potential for influence by outside experts and evidence.”<sup>29</sup>

When we move the focus of the discussion back to the Middle East, two questions arise: are, for instance, people who hold a positive view of Iran more inclined to tune into PressTV? Can we also speak of an echo chamber when the satellite channels under study here report positively on the role of their host nation in the Syrian Civil War? So far, such questions have not been answered in existing academic inquiries.

In order to understand news selection from the eyes of the news consumer, we must resort to psychological explanations and to what is known as cognitive dissonance theory. According to Garrett, “people experience positive feelings when presented with information that confirms that their decision is correct. The effects of this phenomenon should extend to the level of individual news items: the presence of opinion-reinforcing information is expected to increase the likelihood of exposure.”<sup>30</sup> Garrett’s research has focused on internet-based news, but this information is also relevant for televised news and more particularly, newscasts emanating from satellite channels. Nevertheless, there are of course news consumers that do choose news sources whose narrative run contrary to their own political beliefs. On this topic, Garrett tells us that

There are several mechanisms that could help to explain why selectively avoiding opinion challenges is less likely than selectively seeking opinion reinforcement. Most pragmatically, it may be easier to identify counterarguments than to avoid all opinion-challenging information. Another consideration is that encountering criticisms of one’s position in a news story can be useful, giving the individual an opportunity to prepare a rebuttal for future use. Finally, individuals may value being seen as well informed and thoughtful decision makers. On this view, even those whose views are most entrenched want to be aware of why others might disagree.<sup>31</sup>

One matter that can be confirmed with certainty is that the risk of selective exposure increases as more and more news sources enter the media landscape: “As the number of potential news sources multiplies, consumers must choose among them, and that exercise of choice may lead to less diversity

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<sup>29</sup> Bolin and Hamilton, “The News You Choose”, 471.

<sup>30</sup> R. Kelly Garrett, “Echo Chambers Online?: Politically Motivated Selective Exposure among Internet News Users”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 (2009): 267-8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-9.

of political exposure.”<sup>32</sup> One could hypothesize that such a selective exposure problem will exist in both the Middle East and in the market for international news networks, where Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World each seek to claim their spot.

### *The importance of credibility and ethics in journalism*

To the average news consumer, credibility—the quality of being trusted—is firmly embedded and thus a self-evident aspect of modern-day journalism. At the same time, however, trust in journalism is dwindling as credibility seems to be in crisis and is becoming harder to achieve. In the words of Goldstein,

As a society, we are better equipped than ever to distinguish fact-based truth from the sham, but often we seem no longer to care very much about making the distinction. Contemporary journalism has played a supporting role in the eroding influence of fact-based truth. Journalism, as a central foundation of our culture, needs to do a much better job of achieving literal accuracy and, when appropriate, explaining with greater insight why the quest for literal accuracy cannot always be achieved.<sup>33</sup>

Some networks, as outlined above, tend to align the nature of their reporting more with the previously held political views of their viewers, whereby, as explained, the way in which news is framed reinforces political opinions of news consumers, and high viewership numbers reinforce the type of framing done by these broadcasters. However, in different media environments, viewpoints on the value and meaning of credibility may vary, as it can be based on different intentions, such as a directive from higher management either within the news network or within the government in the case the latter is a major shareholder.

The broadcasting of news on television is a practice that first started in the United States and Europe. Therefore, it is necessary to direct our attention to these geographical areas for a better understanding of the key journalistic concept of credibility; one could say that the standard-bearers for journalistic credibility can be found here. One such an example is the Society of Professional

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<sup>32</sup> Diana C. Mutz and Paul S. Martin, “Facilitating Communication across Lines of Political Difference: the Role of Mass Media”, *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1 (March 2001): 111.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Goldstein, “Introduction”, in *Journalism and Truth: Strange Bedfellows* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 9.

Journalists (SPJ), an American organization that has represented journalists—in the broadest sense of the word, so not only televised journalism—since 1909. In its code of ethics, the SPJ writes: “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair, and thorough. ... Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information.”<sup>34</sup> What is striking in this particular description is the discrepancy between ‘information that is accurate, fair, and thorough’ and ‘truthful’.

Credibility has thus already played an important role in the journalistic field throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, but perhaps stands even more in the limelight today as news outlets need to reassert their credentials about truthful news reporting in light of growing mistrust of their work. The spread of news stories whose content is biased and not per se based on the truth is a problem that is not only attributable to the news outlets themselves. Viewers of news media with a defined political profile, as shown above, but also the unsuspecting news consumer, who may pick up on a news story from social media, to name just one avenue, can contribute to this issue. In case of the latter, news items on social media at times wind up being untrue due to the fact that content on such platforms lacks third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment.<sup>35</sup> A correlated trend is a worldwide decline in the ‘trust’, the central feature of credibility, in the media, as one of the key institutions that underlie democratic societies. London-based communications firm Edelman reported in its *2017 Edelman Trust Barometer* report that the measure of trust in four institutions, being business, government, NGOs, and media, had decline over the course of that year, with media showing the largest decline in relative perspective. Their online survey was conducted in 28 countries, including Turkey, but for the largest part focusing on Western democracies, but also some non-democracies such as China and the United Arab Emirates with over 33,000 respondents in total. The London School of Economics’ Truth, Trust, and Technology (T3) Commission quoted Richard Edelman, the

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<sup>34</sup> “SPJ Code of Ethics”, *Society of Professional Journalists*, accessed May 17, 2019, <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

<sup>35</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 211.

CEO of the company behind the *Trust Barometer* as saying that “Media is now seen to be politicized [by news consumers], unable to meet its reporting obligations due to economic pressures, and following social media rather than creating the agenda.”<sup>36</sup>

As a means to restore credibility in journalism, the LSE’s T3 Commission suggests to, inter alia, devote more attention to the subject of diversity. The authors write that “the public needs to feel that the media can represent them. There is continuing underrepresentation of women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities in journalism and media companies, both behind the scenes and in front of the camera.”<sup>37</sup> An important issue in televised journalism is transparency, where especially in news discussion shows, television hosts can outline the news network’s motivation for highlighting a particular topic in the introduction of their broadcast. At times, an editorial note can also be provided in a subsequent news discussion show to rectify a mistake from an earlier broadcast and to thus restore trust and confidence with viewers which has been breached. One example of such an event occurred in the Netherlands in early 2018 when an IT-expert was called on by current affairs program *Nieuwsuur* to explain a series of DDoS attacks that were taking place around the country. One day later, *Nieuwsuur* apologized to the public for inviting the speaker and confirmed the general suspicion that the majority of her statements and claims were untrue.<sup>38</sup>

All in all, several factors contribute to the erosion of trust in the news media that is currently being observed in Western democratic societies. A polarized political landscape, pressures exerted by business models, and a perceived lack of diversity among the broadcasters’ staff and in the people that receive the most attention in reporting are all factors that play a role in this occurrence. In today’s day and age, news consumers no longer need to wait for the delivery of a newspaper or for the next news broadcast, as they can at all times quickly access the news on their smartphones or on the internet. As Al-Oraibi summarizes it: “As the 24-hour news cycle and proliferation of outlets

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<sup>36</sup> “Journalism Credibility: Strategies to Restore Trust”, *London School of Economics and Political Science*, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2L2SN12>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> VPRO Zondag met Lubach, “Nieuwsuur Zegt Sorry—Zondag met Lubach (S08)”, YouTube video, 7:58, February 4, 2018, <https://youtu.be/aunT-MLjbDU>.

increases pressure on editors, writers, and producers to provide more content in a shorter time span, the challenge of maintaining credibility becomes pressing.”<sup>39</sup> Presumably, the issues and pressures mentioned in this section carry even more weight in the work of news networks that broadcast in English and are aiming at an audience in various parts of the world, particularly those that aim to follow into the footsteps of internationally-oriented, English-language news networks.

### *Journalistic credibility in non-Western media environments*

Now that the foundations on the importance of journalistic credibility have been laid, it is time to shift attention to the value of this concept in non-Western media environments, which will take us closer to how it is viewed by both the journalists and the viewers of Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World. An interesting dimension can be added to this discussion by linking the performance of news media (both in the West and beyond) to the concept of ‘soft power’. According to Szostek, “It is thought that the media shape foreign public sentiments, which in turn affect the acquiescence or resistance of foreign elites to particular foreign policy goals.”<sup>40</sup> In her research on the use of news media by Russia to influence public opinion in Ukraine, Szostek says that Russia has latched onto this “soft power bandwagon”<sup>41</sup> and emphasizes that leading Russian news media are actively looking beyond their own borders and are being appropriated as soft power tools with the end goal of presenting a more positive image of the Russian Federation among news consumers in Ukraine. The fact that this power can be attributed to media with a transnational focus is all the more compelling for the current study, but also makes one wonder what this foreign policy edge means for journalistic credibility.

A similar study has been done in Turkey, in which attention is given to the social media outlets of the state-owned Anadolu Agency, one of the two principal state-owned broadcasters in Turkey

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<sup>39</sup> Mina Al-Oraibi, “Why Credibility Is the Future of Journalism”, *World Economic Forum*, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/08/credibility-is-future-of-journalism/>.

<sup>40</sup> Joanna Szostek, “Russia and the News Media in Ukraine: a Case of ‘Soft Power’?”, *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 28, no. 3 (August 2014): 463.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

together with Turkish Radio and Television (TRT), the parent corporation of TRT World. In his analysis of the Turkish press situation, Irak introduces the reader to the concept of ‘press-party parallelism’, which means that “the press in a political system is implicitly or explicitly given a role connected to the party.”<sup>42</sup> In an overview of different geographical clusters that show similar concentrations of press-parallelism, Irak categorizes Turkey within the Mediterranean model, which also includes France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. In his conclusion, he finds that Anadolu Agency’s board members all have similar political backgrounds that align closely with the ideology of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AKP). Moreover, on the basis of their Twitter interactions, “there has not been a single AA board member since 2011 who comes from a different political tendency or even a different journalistic environment. This overlaps with the recruitment patterns and the editorial choices of the agency.”<sup>43</sup> This points to a state of affairs in the Turkish republic where Anadolu Agency, being a state-controlled news outlet, unofficially serves as a mouthpiece for the ruling party. In that respect, Turkey is drawing dangerously close to the ‘propaganda tool’ end of the media roles spectrum outlined earlier. On the other hand, this can also mean that Anadolu Agency is regarded as a trustworthy news source among AKP voters as they often involve the President and quote AKP officials in their news reports, thereby falling in line with what Miller and Kurpius refer to as ‘elites’ and ‘non-elites’, where the former are deemed by viewers to have a lot of expertise on the topic being discussed, thereby enhancing the journalistic credibility of the outlet.<sup>44</sup>

Once we move our attention towards the Arabian peninsula, we see that the credibility of mass media in this region has traditionally been low. Rugh has written a brief analysis on the deplorable state of news credibility. Although it is from 1974, it is useful to quote here by means of a historical primer:

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<sup>42</sup> Dağhan Irak, “A Close-Knit Bunch: Political Concentration in Turkey’s Anadolu Agency through Twitter Interactions”, *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 2 (2016): 338.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>44</sup> Andrea Miller and David Kurpius, “A Citizen-Eye View of Television News Source Credibility”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 54, no. 2 (2010): 140.

The credibility for the news writers and political columnists in the media tends to be lower than in the West. They are frequently suspected of being politically motivated rather than professionals dedicated solely to accurate, factual reporting and enlightenment of the public. Journalism ranks relatively low in prestige except for the handful of prominent columnists in each country—usually fewer than a half dozen—who write the signed political analyses that appear in the daily press. Most of them are chief editors as well, and their relationship to the regime in power is a very important political factor...<sup>45</sup>

In the case of Qatar, we can say with certainty that there was a strategic motive behind the foundation of Al Jazeera, which can be seen as part of a broader liberalization trend that commenced with the ascension to power of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani in 1995. The creation of this news channel was meant to show Qatar's liberal approach to media. However, at the same time, "Putting his country 'on the map' was clearly one of the emir's motives in founding Al Jazeera."<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, perhaps the emir's attempt towards liberalization of the media, achieved through the establishment of Al Jazeera, has also provided a new impetus to the concept of 'credibility' in the region, and a more detailed investigation of news discussion on Al Jazeera English's show *Inside Story* could potentially reveal that it is possible to be credible while at the same time having close relations with the government or the monarchy.

### *The successes and failures of transnational news media in the Middle East*

Since Al Jazeera is the front runner among English-language news media broadcasting from the Middle East, its foundation and an exploration of the reasons as to why it has been successful thus far merits some attention as part of this review. At its inception, Al Jazeera was largely built on a network on a surplus of unemployed, BBC-trained Arab reporters and producers, who were unemployed because the Arabic branch of BBC had shut down.<sup>47</sup> The Qatari emir's decision to abolish the Ministry of Information in 1998 led to an unprecedented sense of press freedom which gave Al Jazeera reporters the opportunity to ask tough and critical questions. There were more aspects

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<sup>45</sup> William A. Rugh, "Arab Information Media: Function and Structure", in *The Arab Press: News Media and Political Process in the Arab World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979), 12-3.

<sup>46</sup> William A. Rugh, "Arab Television Since 1990: Structure", in *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 215.

<sup>47</sup> Josh Rushing and Sean Elder, "Al Jazeera Takes on the Arab World", in *Mission Al Jazeera: Build a Bridge, Seek the Truth, Change the World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 121.

in which Al Jazeera (both the Arabic and English versions) revolutionized the Middle Eastern media landscape. For one, Zayani writes that “Through interactive debates with live phone-ins, Al Jazeera has helped initiate a new kind of viewer experience. The kind of debate championed by Al Jazeera is something new in the Arab world where public political debate is considered subversive. What is particularly interesting about Al Jazeera is its ability to expand what people in the Arab world can talk about.”<sup>48</sup> Important leadership figures from the network have indicated that they aim for Al Jazeera to restore confidence of Arab people in the work of Arab media, which Rugh has highlighted as being traditionally low. By discussing a host of topics that are normally considered taboo, the channel has managed to instill its viewers with a sense of political awareness in a way that very few Middle East-based channels have done before. While the channel has thus been praised for its critical coverage of events in the Middle East, a noteworthy point of critique arises when it concerns reporting on its host country Qatar. On that matter, Da Lage says that

By and large, Al Jazeera has a very skimpy coverage of its host country. For some, the channels’ quasi-inexistent coverage of Qatar’s affairs is a sign of independence since Al Jazeera spares the viewers long reports on the daily activities of the Emir of Qatar, which is a real change from what is usually aired on the overwhelming majority of Arab TV channels, including satellite channels. Others see in this ‘double standard’ the price Al Jazeera has to pay for the freedom it enjoys.<sup>49</sup>

Complicated state-media relationships as they arise in the Middle East, of which Al Jazeera is an excellent illustration, can at times serve as the centerpiece of geopolitical conflict. The introduction of this thesis also briefly highlighted the diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar; while these two countries have not been the best of friends in recent years, the crisis started to take root in 2017, with one of Saudi Arabia’s demands for reconciliation being the shutting down of Al Jazeera. So far, Qatar has not conceded, but the fact that this demand was made is an implicit recognition of the ‘threat’ that Saudi Arabia sees emanating from Al Jazeera in its truthful depiction of Middle Eastern affairs. In an earlier phase of the continuing crisis between the two kingdoms in

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<sup>48</sup> Mohamed Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 5-6.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

2007, Al Jazeera was also used as a political pawn in the temporary mending of relations, as recalled by Samuel-Azran who says that a *New York Times* article

cited correspondence with an Al Jazeera employee who stated that Al Jazeera management used to feed Al Jazeera reporters with negative articles about Saudi Arabia during the conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and gave an explicit order, following the 2007 resolution with Saudi Arabia, prohibiting coverage of any Saudi issue without first receiving permission from higher management.<sup>50</sup>

So, these kinds of moves which are part of what Samuel-Azran calls ‘state-sponsored media diplomacy’ certainly carry negative consequences for Al Jazeera’s credibility. Nonetheless, Al Jazeera’s status as a trailblazer is confirmed in the words of Tatham, who writes that “it is questionable if the channel would ever have been launched had the Qatari government anticipated the difficulties it would cause on the international scene. He quotes the Lebanese communications manager of Al Jazeera at the time (around 2006), who said that “I would be stretching it a bit if I were to say that the Al Jazeera of today is what they [the Qatari government] had envisaged.”<sup>51</sup>

The issue of channel ownership as it related to credibility of Middle Eastern news networks has also proven to be important in the example is of Alhurra, a United States-funded broadcaster established in 2004, broadcasting in the Arabic-speaking world. The channel received a lot of criticism from its intended audience for its biased American stance, which was meant to promote US policy in the region. Seib cites a professor of the American University of Beirut who asks the rhetorical question, “Can they expect the Arabs to watch them if they don’t show Palestinians being killed and don’t portray the Israelis as oppressors?”<sup>52</sup> The first two sentences of Alhurra’s mission statement say that the channel’s “mission is to provide objective, accurate, and relevant news and information to the people of the Middle East about the region, the world, and the United States. Alhurra supports democratic values by expanding the spectrum of ideas, opinions, and perspectives

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<sup>50</sup> Tal Samuel-Azran, “Al Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 9 (2013): 1295.

<sup>51</sup> Steve Tatham, “Towards Free Arab Media”, in *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds: the Coalition, Al Jazeera, and Muslim Public Opinion* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006), 64.

<sup>52</sup> Philip Seib, “Channels and More Channels”, in *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008), 30.

available in the region's media." Further on in the statement it says, inter alia, that "Alhurra illuminates US policies and domestic debates on those policies for Middle Eastern audiences."<sup>53</sup> The channel was established in order to counter the anti-American narrative resonating on Arabic news channels at that time, but in the end, the work of Alhurra only proved to exacerbate anti-Americanism. In terms of credibility, a survey conducted among 3,300 respondents in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates found that 17 percent of respondents regarded Alhurra as 'very trustworthy' or 'trustworthy', whereas 20 percent indicated that it found the channel untrustworthy, thus leading Seib to conclude that "Merely speaking Arabic does not confer credibility. If a station is funded by a foreign government, its protestations about journalistic independence will convince relatively few audience members that what is being broadcast is news rather than propaganda."<sup>54</sup>

While the instance of Alhurra is an interesting one, it ought to, of course, be recognized that the purpose and organizational backbone of this news organization is very different from that of Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World. The patron of Alhurra is the United States government, and the latter's decision to create this channel was done with the aim of forming more favorable views of US policies in the Middle East while broadcasting from within the region, and in Arabic. In a way, the three broadcasters under study here are the mirror image of Alhurra in the sense that their respective patrons are governments from within the Middle East, aiming to provide a different perspective on the region (and other parts of the world) to an audience beyond the Middle Eastern borders by broadcasting in English. Particularly the proliferation of these English-language channels in recent years could be a signal that governments are actively making use of this tool to promote their own policies and domestic activities (in the same vein as Alhurra), but a positive side effect of this development is that it can lead to "fierce competition and subsequently to fair and transparent broadcasting."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> "About Us", *Alhurra*, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://www.alhurra.com/p/417.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> El Mustapha Lahlali, "Globalization, Democracy, and the Arab Media", in *Contemporary Arab Broadcast Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 69.

A last noteworthy transnational and pan-Arab news network initiative from the recent past is the Saudi outlet Al-Arabiya. The channel was established in order to counter the narrative presented by Al Jazeera and to present the news of the region from a Saudi perspective, according to founder Sheikh Walid al-Ibrahim, who is the owner of Al-Arabiya's parent firm, the Middle East Broadcasting Company (MBC) and also brother-in-law of Saudi Arabia's late King Fahd. Sheikh Walid has said that "he sees the channel playing a key role in the Arab world, supporting a 'move towards democracy and freedom and against dictatorship, repression, and Islamic extremism.'"<sup>56</sup> As the research below will point out, such idealistic mission statements always need to be consumed with a grain of salt. In the case of Al-Arabiya, this mission seems to run contrary with several factors that negatively impact the channel's credibility, namely the incongruence between its desire for independent news production and Saudi Arabia's strict Wahhabi fundamentalism, the financial backing it receives from the government, and the fact that (like Al Jazeera) Al Arabiya is also reluctant in issuing critical opinions about the monarchy.<sup>57</sup> Further, in 2018, the Saudi government acquired a 60% controlling stake in MBC, which represents a negative development in the context of journalistic credibility.<sup>58</sup> Even before this act, "Al Arabiya has since its inception been committed to promoting a worldview that is intended not only to fit but also to further Saudi-friendly order in the Arab world, in the face of contending narratives promulgated by Riyadh's regional rivals, not least Tehran and Doha."<sup>59</sup> By means of an example, Behravesch shows that the ousting of Egyptian president Morsi by the country's military was presented as a 'military coup' on Al Jazeera and as a 'second revolution' on Al-Arabiya,<sup>60</sup> thereby also showing how these broadcasters can influence public opinion through framing.

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<sup>56</sup> Tatham, *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds*, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Marwa Rashad and Katie Paul, "Saudi Arabia Plans to Seize Controlling Stake in Broadcaster MBC: Sources", *Reuters*, accessed August 13, 2019, <https://reut.rs/2zkPXxL>.

<sup>59</sup> Maysam Behravesch, "Al Arabiya: the "Saudispeak" of the Arab World", *Asian Politics & Policy* 6, no. 2 (2014): 346

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

### *Gap in the research*

To conclude this review of the academic literature, a common problem encountered in studies of media theory, viewer bias, and journalistic credibility is that the research bears little relevance for the Middle East due to its Western orientation. Al Jazeera was the first network of its kind to broadcast on topics that were previously held to be off limits, and this marked the start of a new era within the Middle Eastern chapter of media theory. As the pioneer in this field, a lot of academic analysis has been devoted to Al Jazeera, but this thesis will aim to include Al Jazeera English in a comparative study with two main competitors, being Iranian PressTV and Turkish TRT World. Do the latter two aim to emulate the model that Al Jazeera English has set out, or do they espouse their own brand of Middle East-based, English-language televised journalism?

This thesis also aims to better integrate the concept of ‘credibility’ in the study of these three networks, and by extension, Middle Eastern news media in general. A brief overview of inquiries into how people choose what news channels they tune into has shown that they will often choose sources whose view of the world and of the political sphere already resonates with their previously held beliefs. The case of the Middle Eastern case presents an interesting addition to this, namely the fact that the three networks find themselves in close and complicated relationships the governments of their respective host countries. Authorities’ ability to impact reporting of the channels will definitely play a role in determining their credibility, especially with regards to issues that are relevant to all three countries involved.

### III. Research design

As stated before, the principal research question of this thesis is as follows: **How do state-supported, English-language televised news media in Qatar, Iran, and Turkey establish their credibility with regards to regional conflicts, specifically the Syrian Civil War?** The answer to the main research question exists of several components. Therefore, the following three sub-questions have been created in order to contribute to the overarching answer of the current study:

1. Can mission statements provide us with reliable information on how the media networks themselves regard the accumulation of journalistic credibility?
2. How do the news networks employ framing with respect to the actions of their host nations in the Syrian Civil War, and does this aid or harm their credibility?
3. What other facets are important to consider when evaluating a newscaster's credibility?

A comparative study is the most helpful manner to come to an answer for the main research question and the three sub-questions. Exploring the topic by comparing the work of the three broadcasters—Al Jazeera, PressTV, and TRT World—will help to broaden our understanding of the Middle Eastern media landscape in general, as Hopkin writes: “Comparison across several cases ... enables the researcher to assess whether a particular political phenomenon is simply a local issue or a broader trend.”<sup>61</sup> To further fine-tune the sample selection, emphasis will be placed on the flagship news discussion shows of each of the three broadcasters. In the case of TRT World this was relatively easy to find, as they themselves call their show *The Newsmakers* their flagship program. To complement this source, the shows on offer on Al Jazeera English and PressTV have been studied in order to find programs that have a similar set-up to *The Newsmakers* (and other news discussion shows around the world), namely the dissection of a news story with the help of a presenter in the studio, (sometimes) a reporter in the field, and several guests present to share their opinion. In the case of Al Jazeera

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<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Hopkin, “The Comparative Method”, in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, eds. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 285.

English, *Inside Story* will serve as the flagship show, and in the case of PressTV, this will be *The Debate*.

### *Episode selection*

As explained previously, the Syrian Civil War will act as an auxiliary case study in the comparative inquiry on the work of the three broadcasters for the reason that each of the host nations behind the broadcasters has a vested interest in the outcome of the war. As the Syrian Civil War currently finds itself in its final, yet crucial stages, the choice has been made to collect video material from the first five months of this year (2019). The material is collected from the broadcasters' respective YouTube channels, as these are most easily accessible. This has yielded the following sample of videos from the broadcasters' flagship news discussion shows. Each show is also given a short code, to allow quick referral later on in the thesis:

<i>Channel/program</i>	<i>Episode title</i>	<i>Publishing date</i>	<i>Link</i>	<i>Code</i>
Al Jazeera English / <i>Inside Story</i>	“Can US and Turkey Find Common Ground over Syrian Kurds?”	January 8, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/k4A19TJ3-fl">https://youtu.be/k4A19TJ3-fl</a>	AJE1
	“What Should Be Done with Foreign ISIL Fighters Captured in Syria?”	February 18, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/WxTMqfW7EZU">https://youtu.be/WxTMqfW7EZU</a>	AJE2
	“Is It All Over for ISIL in Syria?”	February 24, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/7S2UfmIy1Xs">https://youtu.be/7S2UfmIy1Xs</a>	AJE3
	“What Is Syria’s Future after Eight Years of War?”	March 14, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/scrnO1JljL4">https://youtu.be/scrnO1JljL4</a>	AJE4

	“Is ISIL Really Defeated?”	March 23, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/pm5uWiLb4Ro">https://youtu.be/pm5uWiLb4Ro</a>	AJE5
Press TV / <i>The Debate</i>	“The Debate—Syria Civilian Deaths”	January 6, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/5I1VNYokiXE">https://youtu.be/5I1VNYokiXE</a>	PTV1
	“The Debate—US Syria Policy”	January 8, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/kjREcHwCCZw">https://youtu.be/kjREcHwCCZw</a>	PTV2
	“The Debate—Israel Syria Attacks”	January 13, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/mQBXdqFPsU">https://youtu.be/mQBXdqFPsU</a>	PTV3
	“The Debate—Divisions over Syria”	January 20, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/0C27PhP-Ic4">https://youtu.be/0C27PhP-Ic4</a>	PTV4
	“The Debate—Iran-Syria Relations”	February 26, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/hg7JXWD_Dxs">https://youtu.be/hg7JXWD_Dxs</a>	PTV5
	“Debate: Syria Sovereignty”	March 31, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/5htG6jVsozg">https://youtu.be/5htG6jVsozg</a>	PTV6
TRT World / <i>The Newsmakers</i>	“Should the United States Withdraw from Syria?”	January 3, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/1NMpE4fVcdU">https://youtu.be/1NMpE4fVcdU</a>	TRT1
	“What Did Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch Achieve in Syria?”	January 22, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/CVRYnGpkzdE">https://youtu.be/CVRYnGpkzdE</a>	TRT2
	“Daesh’s Last Stand?”	February 27, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/ZAo2a2rTv-s">https://youtu.be/ZAo2a2rTv-s</a>	TRT3
	“Is Syria Ready for Reconstruction?”	March 12, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/pjDkjEML-IM">https://youtu.be/pjDkjEML-IM</a>	TRT4

“Assad Back in the Arab League?”	March 29, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/69WjGOxg22o">https://youtu.be/69WjGOxg22o</a>	TRT5
“Syria’s Prisoners of War”	April 25, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/NWpwTI2Hb8g">https://youtu.be/NWpwTI2Hb8g</a>	TRT6
“We Speak to Survivors of Syria’s Torture Machine”	May 15, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/WgUGXs3U0mE">https://youtu.be/WgUGXs3U0mE</a>	TRT7
“Battle for Idlib”	May 21, 2019	<a href="https://youtu.be/svPwL2a475o">https://youtu.be/svPwL2a475o</a>	TRT8

**Table 1.** Selection of episodes from *Inside Story* (Al Jazeera English), *The Debate* (PressTV), and *The Newsmakers* (TRT World)

*Measuring credibility: the variables at play*

With regards to the notion of ‘credibility’, an important question that remains and which is important to consider is how we measure and assess the credibility of a news source. After all, what can be perceived as credible to one viewer, may not be as credible to another viewer, thereby closely linking this question to the issue of viewer preferences which was discussed in the literature review. There are many variables that factor into the assessment of news credibility, according to, inter alia, Carr *et al.*:

Research shows that evaluations of the credibility of news media depend on factors such as perceived norms of fairness, accuracy, and bias, which in turn depend at least in part on the structure of news stories. Similarly, the style of the host or journalist on television shows can influence the perceived credibility of information, as well as the branding of major news outlets. Taken together, this literature suggests that people perform a complicated mental calculus when assessing the credibility of news. They consider not only the message and the source of the information, but also the way in which the information is presented.<sup>62</sup>

Expertise on the topic at hand and trustworthiness of the message being communicated by a news broadcaster are thus two key variables in audience evaluation of televised news. Expertise is, in part,

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<sup>62</sup> D. Jasun Carr, *et al.*, “Cynics and Skeptics: Evaluating the Credibility of Mainstream and Citizen Journalism”, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2014): 454.

determined by the status of the person delivering a news item and whether this person can be considered 'elite' or 'nonelite', a dichotomy that was already hinted at in the review of the academic literature. Miller and Kurpius write that "those who represent organizations, businesses, or government are considered elites, and people who are unaffiliated and represent themselves and, indirectly, their communities are considered nonelites."<sup>63</sup> Trustworthiness, in their synthesis of several other studies, denotes "a combination of believability, honesty, and lack of bias."<sup>64</sup> The authors also make known that news networks often resort to these elite sources as they are more readily available, and making use of them is a necessity as the market pressures of the 24-hour news cycle force journalists to utilize sources that are immediately at their disposal, including but not limited to government officials and sources present at planned events.<sup>65</sup> Loosely fitting the elites and nonelites framework, and thus another category of guests that can appear on a news show are the so-called 'news shapers' who "provide background or analyses for viewers but are not the focus of the news. ... They are often described by news organizations as 'a leading political scientist', 'an acknowledged expert', or 'a noted foreign policy observer and scholar.'"<sup>66</sup> News networks can bestow these shapers with an air of legitimacy if they appear frequently on a show, but news consumers should be aware that the basis of their legitimacy (and thus credibility) can be thin. Johnson-Cartee cites the example of Ronald Payne, who wrote various news commentaries on the topic of political terrorism following the events of 9/11. The paperback books he has written on this topic have not been peer reviewed and neither "do they have footnotes or documentation as to his sources or his purported evidence."<sup>67</sup>

A different thought-provoking aspect on the basis of which audiences assess the credibility of news broadcasts is biological sex. As a general note, Brann and Leezer Himes inform us that "The

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<sup>63</sup> Miller and Kurpius, "A Citizen-Eye View": 140.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>66</sup> Karen S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 220.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 221.

evening broadcast news anchors have historically been viewed as the most trusted and believable people in television news.”<sup>68</sup> When looking at the variables of ‘competence’ and ‘trustworthiness’, the authors summarize previous studies in saying that men are often perceived to be more competent than women, whereas women are found to be more trustworthy than men.

Similar studies have found that physical attractiveness of the newscasters, as well as race, can play a role in audience determination of credibility. While these studies often add an experiment to prove their hypothesis, this thesis will take the presence (or not) of elite and nonelite guests, and news shapers, as well as the study of newscasters’ biological sex as important determinants to assess the credibility of news on *Inside Story*, *The Debate*, and *The Newsmakers*. What can be safely deduced, nonetheless, is that the degree to which many of the variables at play feed into an assessment of credibility remains a subjective experience, no matter the empirical nature one tries to attach to it.

#### *Operationalizing the research: analyzing framing*

Another important aspect to take into consideration is the analysis of the manner in which news stations can frame and spin the issues of the day; this is especially important when it comes to how Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World portray the role of their host countries in the Syrian Civil War. The use of framing—the act of “select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”<sup>69</sup>—is one of a plethora of actions that can land a news network the label of ‘propaganda tool’.<sup>70</sup> The connection of framing to the news coverage of modern-day wars would make it seem that it is a recent phenomenon, but in 1978, Tuchman already found that

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<sup>68</sup> Maria Brann and Kimberly Leezer Himes, “Perceived Credibility of Male Versus Female Television Newscasters”, *Communication Research Reports* 27, no. 3 (2010): 244.

<sup>69</sup> Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm”, *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 52.

<sup>70</sup> Seth C. Lewis and Stephen D. Reese, “What Is the War on Terror? Framing through the Eyes of Journalists”, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 94.

[T]he news media play an important role in the news consumers' setting of the political agenda. Those topics given the most coverage by the news media are likely to be the topics audiences identify as the most pressing issues of the day. Additionally, the news media have the power to shape news consumers' opinions on topics about which they are ignorant.<sup>71</sup>

It is thus clear from the outset that broadcasters have a large bearing over how its viewers interpret the information it sends out and that, in doing so, they have a variety of means at their disposal. Tuchman's research is largely focused on the United States, so extrapolating the above information to the Middle East provides opportunities for research. By quoting guidelines from Entman,<sup>72</sup> Johnson-Cartee identifies one of the available methodologies for analyzing framing. From the outset, the headline of the story (or perhaps in this case, the title of the episode) serves to lure and entice the news consumer. Beyond the 'headline', there are four important factors presented in a news story that should be taken into account, namely how the problem is defined, how the causes of the problem are diagnosed, the moral judgments associated with the problem, and the remedies that are suggested for the problem.<sup>73</sup>

In the early days of Al Jazeera, the government of the United States has gone so far as to designate the news station a mouthpiece for al-Qaeda, simply because the network made the decision to show some of Osama bin Laden's tapes.<sup>74</sup> Making the link between Al Jazeera and al-Qaeda, and thus between Al Jazeera and terrorism, is also a type of framing that can occur. In this instance, the media is the subject of framing rather than the instigator. This practice does fit into a broader trend, namely the fact that European and North American media will frame events in the Middle East in a different manner than their colleagues from the region itself. In their own synthesis of existing literature, Steuter and Wills note following an analysis of Canadian newspaper headlines covering the War on Terror, featuring sources such as the *Toronto Sun*, the *National Post*, and the *Globe and Mail* that "Media coverage of the events of 9/11 and the subsequent coverage of the wars in

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<sup>71</sup> Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: a Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Entman, "Framing": 52.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing*, 164-5.

<sup>74</sup> "Al-Qaida Tapes Often Come through Al Jazeera", *NBC News*, accessed April 30, 2019, <https://nbcnews.to/2HufVDc>.

Afghanistan and Iraq are critically shaped by pre-existing, Islamophobic frames that reflect neo-colonial assumptions.”<sup>75</sup> This is takes on the nature of portraying the subjects of reports on the Middle East as animals, as the authors find that the “symbolic lexicon” links “Suspected terrorists, enemy military and political leaders, and ultimately, entire populations ... to animals, particularly to prey.” Framing in this language was, moreover, found to be a consistent act in headlines in American, European, and Australian newspapers, as well.<sup>76</sup>

So, we see a dichotomy in terms of the role that media can play in informing its audience of political developments. On the one hand, the potential of media to take on a critical stance allows for multidimensional coverage of a given event, which is beneficial for the public debate even when the reporting runs contrary to the wishes and desires of authorities in the wider region. On the other hand, we can see televised media as a manipulative framing tool, which has the ability to spin news stories in such a way so as to strongly influence the political opinion of its viewers, even when this strays from the truth. Therefore, this thesis, particularly the chapter on host nation portrayal, will pay considerable attention to how the different aspects of the Syrian Civil War are presented and the kinds of judgements that are issued, as well as the language that the hosts and the guests on the three different news discussions shows use in order to present their view on the Syrian Civil War.

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<sup>75</sup> Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, “Discourses of Dehumanization: Enemy Construction and Canadian Media Complicity in Framing of the War on Terror”, *Global Media Journal—Canadian Edition* 2, no. 2 (January 2009): 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

#### IV. Comparing mission statements: Middle Eastern visions on the news

This chapter will evaluate the purpose of journalistic mission statements with an eye on seeing whether the mission statements of Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World can present us with how the three outlets perceive their own sense of credibility. Mission statements can be a helpful start as they can inform a news consumer of the topics and news angles that receive special attention in the reporting that these broadcasters do. However, these statements are not only meant to assist news consumers. “It can be a daily guide for the newsroom itself. If it says your political focus is on issues, it helps editors confidently play a policy story above the latest sniping on Twitter. It can help your editors select news agency stories that reflect your subject priorities.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, in an ideal scenario, they “address the fundamental values that will guide coverage decisions”, but in some instances, the risk remains that mission statements can be viewed as ideological lenses.<sup>78</sup>

##### *For whom and why?*

Academic research on mission statements has thus far predominantly focused on the mission statements of educational institutions and corporations, where a dichotomy exists between positive and critical views on the function of these statements: “Some would argue that articulating a shared purpose is a requisite first step on the road to organizational success. Others are far less sanguine about such efforts and view them as rhetorical pyrotechnics—pretty to look at perhaps, but of little structural consequence.”<sup>79</sup> Further, Morphew and Hartley write on the topic of mission statements for educational institutions that, if observed from an institutional standpoint, mission statements can serve a legitimizing function and “show that the organization in question understands the ‘rules of the game.’”<sup>80</sup> Sometimes, mission statements can be described as very vague, but this has the

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas Kent, “A Mission Statement Is an Important Element of Any News Operation. What’s Yours?”, *Poynter*, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2TVw8ce>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Christopher C. Morphew and Matthew Hartley, “Mission Statements: a Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across Institutional Type”, *The Journal of Higher Education* 77, no. 3 (May-Jun. 2006): 456.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

advantage that it will be harder for observers to prove that an institution or organization is failing to progress towards some sort of goal.<sup>81</sup> In the case of businesses, there are four essential questions a company's mission statement should answer, namely 1) What do we do?, 2) How do we do it?, 3) Whom do we do it for?, and 4) What value are we bringing?<sup>82</sup> This kind of knowledge on the mission statements of businesses and educational institutions can be extrapolated and applied to the world of transnational news media. So far, a lot of the research that has devoted attention to the mission of news media focus on the role of media in the political landscape, where we as viewers and news consumers "must ask journalism to embrace a ... paradox: to function as both a fair-minded moderator and a committed speaker."<sup>83</sup>

In deciding the mission and vision of a news network, channel ownership is again a salient matter, especially when ownership prescribes a certain political alignment. This was for example seen with News Corp (which also includes Fox News), owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch. News Corp appeared "to be openly mobilizing conservative opposition to the Democrat administration" that won the United States presidential elections in 2008. Moreover, once News Corp bought the *Wall Street Journal* in 2007, it started to direct a challenge to the *New York Times*, which was "partly motivated by Rupert Murdoch's frequently expressed political view that the *Times*' belief in journalistic objectivity was a pretense to conceal the promotion of 'left leaning perspectives.'"<sup>84</sup> So, while existing studies show that the 'mission' of a news network does not per se have to be defined through an official statement, and that political alignment can also be included in a mission and vision that need not be precisely defined on the website of said network; this applies to both print and televised news media. A political alignment of this nature can be perceived in the eyes of competitors or be part of a top-down editorial policy established by the outlet's owner(s). Building on this, the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>82</sup> Patrick Hull, "Answer 4 Questions to Get a Great Mission Statement", *Forbes*, accessed June 11, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NCIC5T>.

<sup>83</sup> James S. Ettema, "Journalism as Reason-Giving: Deliberative Democracy, Institutional Accountability, and the News Media's Mission", *Political Communication* 24, no. 2 (2007): 145.

<sup>84</sup> David McKnight, "Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation: a Media Institution with a Mission", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 30, no. 3 (September 2010): 303.

existing studies have also not directly focused on evaluating these clearly defined journalistic mission statements as such, but we can synthesize these different kinds of media roles and employ them in order to determine the usefulness of the mission statements being studied here.

### *The Qatari, Iranian, and Turkish foci*

Now, this thesis will treat the mission statements of Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World in turn. In some instances, the news networks will only make their mission statement a brief aspect of their ‘about us’ page, but in other cases, mission statements will give the impression that a lot more thought has gone into their development. In line with this, part of the mission statement of Al Jazeera English can be read on its ‘about us’ page:

The network challenged established narratives and gave a global audience an alternative voice one [*sic*] that put the people back at the center of the news agenda and quickly made it one of the world’s most influential news networks. Each subsidiary in the Al Jazeera Media Network follows the same principles and values that inspire it to be challenging and bold, and to provide a voice for the voiceless in some of the most unreported places on the planet. It is a responsibility shared by every employee at the Al Jazeera Media Network. From our headquarters to our broadcast centers. In more than 70 bureaus around the world, we strive to deliver content that captivates, informs, inspires, and entertains.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, on their corporate website, which gives more details on the Al Jazeera Network as a whole, they describe their mission as “To inform and empower people with accurate, in-depth and compelling content that upholds the value of truth and elevates the human spirit.”<sup>86</sup> Next, the vision of PressTV is more singularly located in one place on their website, and says:

Heeding the often neglected voices and perspectives of a great portion of the world; embracing and building bridges of cultural understanding; encouraging human beings and different nationalities, races, and creeds to identify with one another; bringing to light untold and overlooked stories of individuals who have experienced the vitality and versatility of political and cultural divides firsthand.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “Who We Are”, *Al Jazeera*.

<sup>86</sup> “What We Stand For”, *Al Jazeera Media Network*, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://network.aljazeera.com/about-us/our-values>.

<sup>87</sup> “About PressTV”, *PressTV*, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2014/12/31/390988/About-PressTV>.

Lastly, we take a look at the mission statement of TRT World which, in the same vein as Al Jazeera English, presents its mission and vision on news reporting only briefly on a dedicated page: “Our mission is to expand understanding, challenge assumptions, encourage debate, and influence positive behavior. Our vision is to be a catalyst for positive change.”<sup>88</sup> Building on that, TRT World’s ‘our story’ page provides a more detailed look on their overall mission, of which selected parts are presented here:

Since the course of 2002 Turkey has become an increasingly significant country both as a regional and global actor. This period of stability, development, and strong international relations has led to the natural emergence of TRT World. Turkey’s geopolitical and geocultural positioning is indicative of a potential to see world events differently. ... In an age where the primary language of mutual communication ... is English, TRT World will provide new perspectives on world events to a global audience. Reading, listening, or watching the news will not be the end of the line for the TRT World audience. We are aiming to get a response from our viewers; a reaction, a change in their thought pattern, a different perception of social issues and a more clear, deeper understanding of various cultures and ethnicities. It is a two way streak [*sic*] at TRT World and we invite you to be a part of our aspiration and your inspiration. ... TRT World will put emphasis on the humanitarian angle of each story, prioritizing how the event influences the people rather than the stakeholders. With an original media enterprise model uninfluenced by those of other global media outlets, we hope to contribute to the narrative of how stories are told and channel in new perspectives of thought. In other words, we aspire for a better informed global audience.<sup>89</sup>

The first similarity can be observed between the mission statements of Al Jazeera English and PressTV, as parallels can be drawn between key terms and phrases such as ‘voice for the voiceless’ and ‘unreported places’ on the one hand, and ‘neglected voices and perspectives’ on the other. Another interesting aspect is the emphasis on cultural values and the bridging of different cultural understandings, which is something both PressTV and TRT World strive to include in their reporting, the difference here being that TRT World really focuses on Turkey’s position in the world by means of a justification for its news focus. Also worth mentioning in this regard is that TRT World notes the increased significance of Turkey on the world stage since 2002, which happens to be the year in which President Erdoğan’s AKP came into power, possibly suggesting a close alignment of TRT World with the Turkish authorities. PressTV’s aim to connect people from different ‘nationalities,

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<sup>88</sup> “About Us – Mission & Vision”, *TRT World*, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/about>.

<sup>89</sup> “About Us – Our Story”, *TRT World*, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/about>.

ances, and creeds' is clearly the most airy and idealistic part of their mission statement, but then again, the advantage here is that any journalistic effort—even when it only concerns the commonplace invitation of guests from two different countries to share their view on a news story—can be seen as a valid contribution towards that goal. A distinction between idealistic and realistic aspects in mission statements can also be seen in the mission of the Al Jazeera Network. They believe their content should be compelling and truthful, and geared towards 'elevating the human spirit', where the first two aspects are quite realistic and tie in well with the challenges currently faced in the journalistic arena, and the latter part is without a doubt the more quixotic counterpart of the statement. The same can be said of TRT World's aim to be a 'catalyst for positive change'. In a certain sense, the goals these satellite networks set themselves through their mission statements is thus a counterbalance between achievable goals, and overarching 'feel good' targets. The last aspect worth mentioning here is the emphasis on interaction with viewers, which is heavily underlined in TRT World's vision. However, only by actually viewing their work will make it possible to see how they aim to realize this interaction with viewers in the newsroom. To conclude, we can link the mission statements of the three broadcasters to the central concept of 'credibility' by proclaiming that they receive a higher score in terms of credibility if they put the principles from their mission statements into practice on their respective current affairs programs. A clearly defined mission can be part of a well-thought out strategy to gain trust from your audience, which the Trusting News Project says "should live not just in your 'About' page but within your daily journalism."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> "Start Earning Trust", *Trusting News*, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://trustingnews.org/start-earning-trust/>.

## V. Analyzing flagship news shows: turning mission statements into practice

This empirical section of the thesis aims to show the extent to which Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World succeed in putting their mission statements into practice, particularly in relation to their reporting on the Syrian Civil War. As outlined in the research design, video material from three news discussion programs—*Inside Story*, *The Debate*, and *The Newsmakers*—all aired in 2019, and retrieved from the three networks’ respective YouTube accounts has been watched in order to answer this question. Using some of the criteria discussed in the research design, an assessment will be made of two features. On the one hand, the choice of discussion topics in the context of the civil war in Syria will be evaluated, which can range anywhere from the fight against ISIL to an evaluation of the Assad regime to regional and international efforts. On the other hand, this section looks at the guests that are being invited onto the shows to discuss the topic at hand, and will attempt to determine what the selection of guests means for the credibility of the news program using biological sex, as well as the distinction between elite and nonelite guests and news shapers, amongst others, to reach a verdict. The other aspect of the research design, a look at how the three news stations employ framing, will feature more prominently in the next chapter.

### *Discussion topic of choice: a sneak peek into editorial decision-making*

Within the particular phase of the Syrian Civil War being studied here, namely the first five months of 2019, Turkey has definitely been a key player. Before the year began, US President Trump announced that he would withdraw the American troops from Syria, which provoked a response from the Turkish government. In their view, they were the ‘natural successor’, as it were, to the Americans when it came to managing the military situation on the ground, and an American withdrawal would pave the way to strengthen their own presence in northern Syria.<sup>91</sup> The only obstacle in this respect was the fact that in their campaign, the Americans (and with them, a number of other Western

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<sup>91</sup> Steven A. Cook, “Syria’s Changing Power Grid: What Turkey Wants”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/article/syrias-changing-power-grid-what-turkey-wants>.

countries) had worked together with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance consisting of predominantly Kurdish militias, such as the People's Protection Units (YPG). In Turkey's eyes, the YPG is simply the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a political organization that Turkey has been at war with for more than thirty years. This organization is also branded 'terrorist' by, inter alia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. As such, Turkey has been vigorously attempting to have its allies recognize the YPG under this label, as well, but such attempts do not sit well with the United States, who have threatened Turkey with punitive economic measures, should they proceed with attacking the US' Kurdish allies in northern Syria.<sup>92</sup>

The coverage of the Syrian Civil War in Al Jazeera English's *Inside Story* from this year shows an interesting trend, namely that the vast majority of the broadcasts were focused on the defeat of ISIL. Three of the five *Inside Story* videos, AJE2, AJE3, and AJE4, focus on this aspect of the war. One possible reason for this choice is that Al Jazeera English aims to distance itself from claims of other regimes in the region that Qatar is a sponsor of ISIL by calling the atrocities committed by this terrorist group nothing short of deplorable—an opinion in line with the majority of the international community. Claims that link Qatar to ISIL have been going around in policy circles in recent years, but many of them are often poorly substantiated.<sup>93</sup> The extent to which content on this matter is 'accurate, in-depth, and compelling' as per its mission statement is a subjective experience for videos AJE2, AJE3, and AJE5, but accuracy of information does seem to be warranted in the videos AJE1 and AJE5, which focus on the bilateral and multilateral processes around the winding down of the civil war, such as the role of the Kurds and the relations between Turkey and the United States, and the massive reconstruction bill that Syria now faces.

In the case of PressTV, the chosen topics in *The Debate* show a fairly wide variety of angles in the Syrian conflict, but are also very much an extension of the Iranian policy of regarding the

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<sup>92</sup> "Syria Profile—Timeline", *BBC News*, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>.

<sup>93</sup> Jamie Dettmer, "US Ally Qatar Shelters Jihadi Moneymen", *Daily Beast*, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/us-ally-qatar-shelters-jihadi-moneymen>.

United States as ‘Great Satan’ and Israel as ‘Little Satan’.<sup>94</sup> While not explicitly stated as such, many of the videos, particularly PTV1, PTV2, PTV3, and PTV6, are overtly critical of the roles that the United States and Israel play in the conflict, and consequently aims to show to its international viewers that these two countries should not be trusted. To echo the words of the presenter in PTV6 following the wrap-up of the opening segment, “Just because US officials say something, does not mean it is true.” Lastly, the topics covered in TRT World’s *The Newsmakers* show a lot of resemblance with *Inside Story*, with TRT3, TRT4, and TRT5 covering subjects that have also been dealt with by *Inside Story*. In this respect, it is interesting to note that this show is the only of the three to have a consistent host, the South African journalist Imran Garda, and that he, previous to his employment with TRT World, used to present *Inside Story* on Al Jazeera English. Besides discussing the retreat of ISIL, the reconstruction process, and the status of the Assad regime within the Arab League, *The Newsmakers* also highlights the Turkish role in the first two videos on the topic of Syria this year. In TRT1 and TRT2, the US withdrawal from Syria (with obvious implications for the role of Turkey) and an evaluation of Operation Olive Branch, which started in March 2018, are considered, with the aim of putting the Turkish efforts into the picture for the international audience.

### *Steering the discussion with guests*

In different academic studies on the work of Al Jazeera English, it has been proven that the geographic emphasis of its reporting lies with the South, being Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. In her quantitative study of Al Jazeera English’s program *NewsHour*, Figenschou found that 61% out of a total of 1,324 surveyed news items were presented from the Global South, and 38% were presented from the Global North, being Europe and North America.<sup>95</sup> So, as far as *NewsHour* is concerned, Al Jazeera English lives up to its mission of focusing on ‘unreported places’, thereby managing to enhance its credibility. However, does the same apply to the reports of *Inside*

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<sup>94</sup> Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, “The Great Satan”, in *Hating America: a History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 167.

<sup>95</sup> Figenschou, “A Voice for the Voiceless?”: 91.

*Story* and the guests that are invited here to discuss one particular aspect of the Syrian Civil War? Will these discussed aspects also qualify as ‘unreported’? In each instalment of *Inside Story*, three guests are invited, with the exception of AJE5, in which the program invited four guests. When looking at their institutional background, eight out of sixteen guests are from the Global North. Only one guest makes an appearance twice in the five videos, being the Syrian researcher Marwan Kabalan, the director of policy analysis at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha. Al Jazeera English should also be credited for almost exclusively inviting elite guests, with all speakers currently being attached to a renowned research institutions in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Turkey. The few guests that make an appearance in *Inside Story* with a nonelite status, meaning they have dealt with Syria in a past occupation, always have a trustworthy reputation based on the work they did in their previous capacity. One example of this is Wa’el Alzayat in AJE5, who served as the Syria advisor for former US Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power. In the vast majority of *Inside Story* broadcasts, solely men were invited as guests. The only exception is AJE4, in which two women and one man featured to discuss the defeat of ISIL.

As for PressTV, all broadcasts of *The Debate* make use of men to talk about the topic at hand. In contrast with *Inside Story*, *The Debate* features two guests in each instalment. Furthermore, here the majority of guests have a nonelite capacity, a lot of them being journalists from the United States or the United Kingdom speaking on behalf of themselves, who seen in this role can also be seen as news shapers. At times, they are associated with a particular news website, but in such events it often concerns controversial niche platforms. For instance, the two guests—both American—in PTV2 work for *Veterans Today* and *AttackTheSystem.com*, respectively. The former, while indeed being a journal dedicated to military veterans, frequently produces conspiracy theories, such as that Israel orchestrated 9/11 in conjunction with the US government, that the United States is a puppet of Israel, or that the Holocaust never happened.<sup>96</sup> To the educated viewer, such anti-Israel claims made by

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<sup>96</sup> Evelyn Schlatter, “Buyer Beware: Veterans Today and Its Anti-Israel Agenda”, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2011/01/06/buyer-beware-veterans-today-and-its-anti-israel-agenda>.

representatives of platforms like *Veterans Today* on *The Debate* can be quite easily debunked, but the more unsuspecting viewer could easily take in the information he/she receives from the program, thereby helping to advance Iran's foreign policy agenda. In certain videos, *The Debate* does make the attempt of bringing in guests with various opinions by, for instance, hearing Richard Millet, a self-employed, London-based journalist and political commentator, who often defends Israel's actions in Syria as displayed in PTV3 and PTV4. However, the fact that Millet is often cut short by the show's presenter and openly attacked by his fellow guest in the program, serves to demonstrate that opinions in favor of Israel are not particularly welcome. Moreover, such practices also put a stain on PressTV's mission of creating bridges of cultural understanding.

Lastly, TRT World seems to strike a more delicate balance between representing Turkish interests on one hand, while at the same time delivering and discussing news on Syria in an unbiased fashion through the guests invited on *The Newsmakers*. The former can be seen through, inter alia, the inclusion of guests from domestic think tanks, most notably the Ankara-based SETA Foundation, representatives of which make an appearance in TRT2, TRT4, TRT6, and TRT8. In other news media, the SETA Foundation is often described as a pro-AKP think tank with close relations to the Turkish government.<sup>97</sup> On top of that, SETA's founding director is İbrahim Kalın, who now serves as spokesperson of, and advisor to, President Erdoğan. Nevertheless, SETA's representatives often make claims directed against the regime of Syrian President Assad, calling it illegitimate and criticizing him for his inhumane treatment of civilians and prisoners—quite likely something that not many of viewers of both TRT World and other international news channels can disagree with. As for other, foreign think tanks, it is interesting to note that they often have a conservative background. For example, in TRT3, we see Robin Simcox, a fellow at the Heritage Foundation, and in TRT1, TRT3, and TRT4, Matthew Brodsky is invited, who serves as a senior fellow at the relatively new Security Studies Group which has been characterized as conservative and is currently advising the Trump

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<sup>97</sup> "Erdoğan Faces Future of Power Sharing", *BBC News*, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34641532>.

administration on the Qatar diplomatic crisis.<sup>98</sup> In TRT4, a researcher in Russian Studies from Oxford University and the coordinator of the Center of Iranian Studies in Ankara are brought in in order to provide a perspective on the Russian and Iranian interests in Syria—a smart move that falls in line with TRT World’s mission to expand the understanding and challenge the assumptions of its viewers, and thus helping to boost credibility.

Furthermore, *The Newsmakers* features a multitude of nonelite guests, many of whom held important positions in diplomacy or government, or who have been dealing with Syria in such a capacity. One good example of this is former Syrian diplomat Bassam Barabandi, who now leads the Syrian opposition group People Demand Change from Washington, DC. He makes an appearance in TRT2, TRT4, TRT5, and TRT8. A final noteworthy aspects concerning the guests on *The Newsmakers* is that here, too, almost all broadcasts make use of men for their analysis. The only exception to this is TRT7, which features two men and three women (more than the normal number of guests on an instalment), some of whom have personally been affected by the torture taking place in Syrian prisons. Interestingly, the only news item that deals with more personal, emotional stories provides a platform for female guests to tell their story, whereas the other items dealing with factual news make use of only men.

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<sup>98</sup> Akbar Shahid Ahmed, “Think Tank Led By Man Who Warned High Schooler’s Clock Was ‘Half a Bomb’ Says It’s Advising White House on Qatar Crisis”, *HuffPost*, accessed June 22, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2x6VzKN>.

## VI. Portrayal of host nations

The way in which the roles of Qatar, Iran, and Turkey in Syria are portrayed by their respective news channels can tell us a lot about the objectivity, and thus the credibility of said networks. The previous chapter has shown that *Inside Story* on Al Jazeera English and *The Newsmakers* on TRT World perform reasonably well in living up to their mission statement, thereby landing them a positive credibility score. However, *The Debate* on PressTV performs relatively poor in this regard. This last chapter further factors in the extent to which the three programs discuss the role of their host nations in the Syrian conflict, which can serve as an important indicator for where we can place them on the credibility evaluation spectrum. If the role of the host nation is discussed on the show, the broadcaster would be acting as a democratic watchdog if it were to allow for criticism on this role. On the other hand, speaking only positively of the host country's actions in Syria would push it more towards the 'propaganda' end of the spectrum, as it only reinforces pre-existing echo chambers in doing so.

### *Qatar: omitted and thus forgotten?*

The last chapter demonstrated that the defeat of ISIL has been the topic covered most on *Inside Story* in 2019; the possible explanation behind this decision—to distance Qatar from terrorist movements—is only a hypothesis. Indeed, the role of Qatar in the Syrian conflict is not mentioned once in the various broadcasts. Al Jazeera English does build on its credibility by inviting a variety of elite guests to present a balanced opinion, but the words of Da Lage, referred to in the literature review, ring true here. He wrote about the channel's 'quasi-inexistent' coverage of Qatar's affairs, and the fact that this is a sign of independence on the one hand, but on the other hand is a price it has to pay for its independence. This paradox also prevents Al Jazeera English from executing a democratic watchdog function. Each of the observed episodes of *Inside Story* goes into detail about topics that may very well be of interest to international viewers, such as the treatment of foreign ISIL fighters (AJE2) and the reconstruction bill following the civil war (AJE5). Moreover, the program

retains a critical stance vis-à-vis the Assad regime and the international community throughout—it is mentioned in AJE5 that this conflict is “a textbook example of the international community failing the Syrian people.”

In spite of the channels strong track record in this regard, the role that Qatar plays is not discussed. Other news media and research institutions have pinpointed that especially in the early stages, the Qatari monarchy provided finances and weaponry to several rebel groups in Syria, leading the *Financial Times* to conclude that “its financial support for the revolution that has turned into a vicious civil war dramatically overshadows Western backing for the opposition” and that “its intervention in Syria is part of an aggressive quest for global recognition.”<sup>99</sup> At the same time, the program merits praise for also providing a balanced opinion on the role of Qatari allies, most notably Turkey, which has been used as a transit for Qatari weapons deliveries.<sup>100</sup> In AJE1, for instance, a commentator from the Ankara Institute contends that Turkey is frustrated with the United States over its relationship with the PYD, the Kurdish confederalist political party in northern Syria. Another guest on the show, from the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington, DC, counters by saying that people living in Kurdish town in northern Syria would prefer to continue living under the rule of President Assad once the United States pulls out, as opposed to living under a Turkish administration as seen in Afrin. In doing so, Al Jazeera English puts people at the center of its reporting, in accordance with its mission statement, and provides news that informs and is in-depth. So, when the observations above are taken together, it can be argued that Al Jazeera English is a credible news source, but that it merits a unique category on the credibility spectrum, as it can be considered neither a watchdog nor a propaganda tool.

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<sup>99</sup> Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, “Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms”, *Financial Times*, accessed June 23, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NCmLKJ>.

<sup>100</sup> CJ Chivers and Eric Schmitt, “Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, with Aid from CIA”, *The New York Times*, accessed August 22, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/32bLwSd>.

### *Iran: purported innocence*

It goes without saying that Iran has always been a strong ally of Syria, and that since the outbreak of the civil war, it has supported and defended the Assad regime tooth and nail. The Iranian-Syrian alliance is a paradox in and of itself because of the widely differing political ideologies that both states espouse, with Syria being a secular, pan-Arab, socialist republic, and Iran being a revolutionary, pan-Islamic theocracy. However, Goodarzi says that this type of paradox is seen more often in the Middle East, where “the record clearly shows that states sharing a common ideology compete for the mantle of leadership rather than form durable alliances.”<sup>101</sup> The alliance between the two nations also prevails in the different episodes of *The Debate* on PressTV. The principal intention of the Iranian regime to intervene in Syria is to preserve the ‘axis of resistance’, consisting of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.<sup>102</sup>

Interestingly, Iran’s intentions and actions are heavily downplayed on *The Debate*, even to the extent of ascribing Iran the role of the ‘good guy’. In PTV2, for instance, it is mentioned that Iran has not committed an aggressive act in more than 300 years, and in PTV5, *The Debate*’s reporter indicates that Iran has always rejected a military solution for the Syrian conflict, and that it is working together with Turkey and Russia to achieve a political solution instead, thereby highlighting the country’s positive influence. To retain some semblance of diversity in opinions, the journalist that was mentioned earlier, Richard Millet, voices criticism of the Iranian regime, saying that it is “spreading its tentacles” throughout the region with the establishment of military bases. Furthermore, in PTV4, he makes another appearance, saying that it is difficult to let Syria back into the Arab League when the country is being effectively controlled by Iran. However, such comments are rebuffed by both the other guest and the presenter, the latter of whom a viewer would expect to take on a neutral stance. Meanwhile, in PTV2, ISIL is referred to as “a creation of the CIA, Mossad, and Saudi intelligence services”, with the validity of these kinds of comments not being called into question. The strength

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<sup>101</sup> Jubin M. Goodarzi, “Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment”, *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 4, no. 2 (January 2013): 36.

<sup>102</sup> Payam Mohseni and Hassan Ahmadian, “What Iran Really Wants in Syria”, *Foreign Policy*, accessed June 23, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/10/what-iran-really-wants-in-syria/>.

of the Syrian-Iranian alliance is also underlined by another London-based journalist, Syed Mohsin Abbas, who appears more frequently on *The Debate*, speaking in a nonelite, news shaper capacity. He says in PTV5 that the “Zion-imperialist forces” will have a hard time breaking the strong relationship between Iran and Syria. Rather than building bridges of cultural understanding, as specified in PressTV’s mission statement, the reports aired on *The Debate* seem to be more comfortable with the practice of destroying such bridges. Inviting guests that defend the Israeli perspective merits some degree of praise with regards to credibility, but for the most part, the information provided on the channel would land it the label of ‘propaganda tool’.

*Turkey: strong, but occasionally subject to scrutiny*

The only country out of the three surveyed here to actually border Syria, the role of Turkey in the conflict is much more pronounced, most notably through Operation Olive Branch, the invasion of the Kurdish-majority town Afrin in northwestern Syria in March 2018. The pending withdrawal of American troops from Syria puts the possible courses of action for the Turkish government more and more in the spotlight, especially when looking at what this might mean for other Kurdish-majority areas in Syria that are located close to the Turkish border.<sup>103</sup> On *The Newsmakers*, the results of Operation Olive Branch are critically examined in TRT2. In this piece, Murat Aslan, a researcher from the SETA Foundation, which as discussed above is pro-government according to some sources, calls the operation a success. Given that the original aims of the mission were to further secure the border, to prevent the infiltration of terrorist cells, and to create a secure zone to allow for the return of Syrian civilians, he argues that through the military operation, Turkey has catered for more stability in the region. In response, presenter Imran Garda makes mention of several attacks and suicide bombings having taken place in Afrin and Manbij, saying that Turkey may be putting an “overtly optimistic spin” on the mission, in order to counter Aslan’s statement that the operation was a success. This shows that it is possible to critically examine Turkish foreign policy on the program.

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<sup>103</sup> Cook, “Syria’s Changing Power Grid”.

In other episodes, there is plenty of room to voice the perspective that the YPG is a terror group (TRT3), that it is countries like Turkey and Russia that are making the “real difference” in Syria (TRT5), and that it has been Turkey, in collaboration with Russia and Iran, that was responsible for orchestrating a prisoner swap with the Syrian regime (TRT6). The fact that Turkey is currently hosting millions of Syrian refugees is also stressed in several videos. All of these comments are, of course, good publicity for the Turkish government. With this, it might be easy to classify TRT World as a propaganda channel, but it is different from, for example, PressTV in the sense that critical voices on the Turkish performance are not completely eschewed. As such, it takes the media function of democratic watchdog seriously. Following TRT World’s vision, which amongst others aims to challenge assumptions and encourage debate, *The Newsmakers* is also doing an adequate job at keeping the discussion balanced by taking in opinions from inter alia Turkish, Syrian, American, British commentators. The humanitarian angle that is promised in the mission statement, is also warranted with the two episodes geared towards the situation of Syrian prisoners of war. On the credibility spectrum, it would thus be justified to place them halfway on the line between ‘watchdog’ and ‘propaganda tool’.

## VII. Conclusion

In terms of Arab satellite news media, Al Jazeera and its subsidiary channel Al Jazeera English have most definitely changed the rules of the game. The episodes of its current affairs program *Inside Story* aired in the first five months of 2019 resonate with its mission statement in the sense that the channel provides a ‘voice for the voiceless’ by inviting a multitude of guests originating from the Global South to discuss the events of the Syrian Civil War. Many of these guests also have an ‘elite’ status, which helps to further boost the credibility of Al Jazeera English. The only caveat that prevents the channel from being qualified as a democratic watchdog is that it neglects the involvement of Qatar in Syria. Even though the Qatari government has taken on a pioneering role in comparison with other Middle Eastern governments by being the first to establish an English-language news station with almost no limitations to report on the matters of the day, the country is an important player in one of the most brutal conflicts in the region. This goes back to the trade-off and paradox that was discussed earlier, where the abstention of reporting on the involvement of the monarchy is the price Al Jazeera English has to pay for being able to work without boundaries and limitations defined by the authorities. In this respect, it can also be deduced that the focus of *Inside Story* on the defeat of ISIL without discussing Qatar’s role in the process is a contribution to the goal of building a narrative that severs all possible links between the Gulf monarchy and terrorist activities.

Nonetheless, the function that Al Jazeera has thus far had in the Arab news media landscape has led to the coining of the term ‘Al Jazeera effect’. Have PressTV and TRT World undertaken similar pioneering roles that could in the near future lead to the coining of a ‘PressTV effect’ and a ‘TRT World effect’? In all likelihood, the answer to that question is negative. The links that these two channels have to their respective governments are more pronounced than in the case of Al Jazeera English. Thus, while they have followed the latter on the path of English-language news broadcasting, *The Debate* and *The Newsmakers* often highlight the positive role of their host countries in Syria, whereas Al Jazeera English has made it a practice to not discuss the role of Qatar at all. Such positivity with regards to the host nation is visible the most on *The Debate*, where Iran is frequently portrayed

as a peace-loving country that has done nothing wrong, and that it is the United States and Israel that are fully to blame for the chaos in the Fertile Crescent. This view is promoted by both the presenters of the show and by the majority of the guests, most of whom are speaking in a personal capacity and can be classified as ‘nonelite’ and news shapers. All in all, these factors run contrary to the promises PressTV makes in its mission statement, and as such they do not bode well for the channel’s credibility.

As for TRT World, Turkey’s role in Syria is often discussed on *The Newsmakers*. In one episode the successes of Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch in northern Syria is called into question by the presenter, showing that it is possible to scrutinize this. However, this stands in contrast with the other episodes, where the role of the country is repeatedly praised, although it must also be said that the fact that Turkey is currently hosting a few million Syrian refugees (with financial assistance from the European Union) has also landed it praise from the international community.<sup>104</sup> This is also a stark contrast with Al Jazeera English, as TRT World emphasizes the work of its host country in Syria, and thus assists in spreading the Turkish perspective on the Syrian Civil War. To be fair, the strong status of Turkey in the Middle East and the world is also referenced in TRT World’s mission statement, so in this respect, the focus on Turkish policy and military decisions is not completely unwarranted. Nevertheless, we may still speak of a firm bond between TRT World and the Turkish government, which is displayed, inter alia, by the frequent invitation of guests from the SETA Foundation, a think tank that shares common interests with the ruling AKP. Many of the other guests on *The Newsmakers* have different nationalities and a nonelite status, but have dealt with Syria in a previous capacity. Taking all these pieces of evidence in mind, it would be most fitting to place TRT World in the middle of the credibility evaluation spectrum, as it sometimes makes the impression of a democratic watchdog, but also on occasion makes statements that are more often associated with a propaganda tool.

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<sup>104</sup> Beatriz Rios, “EU Auditors Praise Refugee Assistance to Turkey Despite Irregularities”, *EurActiv*, accessed August 24, 2019, <https://bit.ly/326FeTO>.

All in all, this thesis has attempted to provide a snapshot of the status of the contemporary English-language news media landscape in the Middle East, where a lot has changed since the foundation of Al Jazeera English in 2006. On a worldwide level, the discussion of trustworthiness and credibility of news media has offered a lot of fuel for discussion in recent years. With that in mind, it is only justified to also have this discussion as it relates to the proliferation of these English-language news outlets in the Middle East, and the research in this thesis has shown that each of the three channels under study has formulated its own manner to be perceived as credible. In the case of Al Jazeera English, it will be perceived as credible by the news consumer, whereas the reports of PressTV will most likely only be credible in the eyes of the Iranian government and those that hold a pre-existing favorable view of Iran's foreign policy in the region, thereby leading to a reinforced echo chamber. Lastly, the reports on TRT World will be credible to both authorities and news consumers alike, as they show some degree of variety in the ways in which they establish their credibility. Of course, this research has had its limitations, the most important of which is the sample size. It is difficult to provide a generalizing statement on the credibility of the three news outlets based on the viewing of between five and eight episodes from each current affairs program. Therefore, future research on English-language news media in the Middle East could work on expanding this sample size in order to establish a more holistic comparative framework for evaluating the credibility performance of these kinds of news media. Another interesting avenue for research could be a comparison of the credibility between news media aired in domestic languages versus news media aired in English, to see whether there are major differences in the type of messages the stations aim to get across to domestic audiences versus international audiences. Such studies have already been conducted for Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English, but the scope can thus be expanded to also cover, for instance, TRT Haber and TRT World, and Al-Alam News and PressTV.

At the end of the line, one factor that Al Jazeera English, PressTV, and TRT World all have in common is that they contribute to the building of a national narrative with regards to Syria in some shape or form. AbuKhalil reminds us that "Propaganda posing as analysis has dominated the

discourse on Syria” and that “Both sides [of the war] are adamant about the validity of their narrative and the falsehood of the counternarrative, [while] In reality, both narratives are rather valid—simultaneously so.”<sup>105</sup> So, for any news consumer wishing to obtain his or her information from one of these English-language Middle Eastern news channels, a critical eye remains of the essence.

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<sup>105</sup> As’ad AbuKhalil, “How the Saudi-Qatari Rivalry Has Fueled the War in Syria”, *The Intercept*, accessed August 24, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2018/06/29/syria-war-saudi-arabia-qatar/>.

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