

A Semiotic Study of Contemporary Middle Eastern Internal Dilemmas in Arab News Cartoons

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Abstract

Many parts of the Middle Eastern region have a history of persistent and long-term crises. The media, and particularly the news media, endeavors to highlight these issues in various forms. One established format among them is caricatures, or cartoonish representations, which retain a visually captivating quality for the intended audience. Undeniably, cartoons depict the bitter realities in candid yet convincing forms. In this regard, the present study aims to analyze the Arab News cartoons that depict the internal predicaments faced by the selected Middle Eastern countries. The primary objective of this study is to examine the intricate relationship between semiotics and socio-political intricacies in the selected regions. This study employs Barthes' semiotic lens theory to investigate the methods employed by the cartoonist in conveying messages, creating narratives, and interacting with the socio-political environment. The results reveal that the caricatured representations effectually depict several underlying causes and conflicts that fuel the internal chaotic situation inside the region, using signs, symbols, and pictorial rhetoric. These findings help in understanding the essence of the challenges faced by the chosen Middle Eastern nations quite meritoriously. At the same time, the results endorse cartoons as an authentic medium for discussing such harsh realities.

Keywords: cartoons, Arab Media, semiotics, Middle East, predicaments/dilemmas

1. Introduction

The Middle East, a significant geographical region, exhibits a long history of volatility and uncertainties, influenced by a range of internal and external reasons. Certain countries in this particular setting have exhibited a persistent state of unrest since ancient times in comparison to other regions around the globe (Khalid & Naz, 2018). The Arab countries most significantly impacted in this context encompass Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Palestine. The enduring nature of the crisis in these nations has been a consistent feature throughout historical periods and has exhibited a gradual escalation over time (Pollack, 2015). From meager politics to failed economies, several reasons have resulted in these dilemmas. Many researchers have tried to explain these issues, as represented in the worldwide media (for example, Khalid & Naz, 2018; Younis, Hashemi, Postel, & Al-Rasheed, 2017; Guardia, 2002; etc.) from various perspectives.

Media plays an important role in making and shaping news, as their significant concern is often rating and profit (Downie & Kaiser, 2002). However, at the same time, they help the world to get to know what is happening in the world around them. In other words, they keep us updated with contemporary information. The Middle Eastern crisis is also an attention-grabbing area of concern for the world as it has geographical, economic, and political significance. Thus, the global media has given it sufficient representation for various reasons (Hirchi, 2007). Al-Khalifa (2012) narrates that "during crises, people rely on the media for news" (pg. 2). The reason is usually that countries in crisis are unapproachable to the commoners. Various forms of media discourse present these dilemmas; however, the cartoonish depiction is more engaging than the written texts. According to Hameed and Afzal (2021), cartoons appeal to the audience as they are caricatured forms of reality, whereas factual portrayal is often hard to sense. In short, cartoons have a long history of being used as a medium for commentary on political matters and occurrences.

As mentioned above, these internal predicaments of several Middle Eastern countries have been subject to various studies, but so far no such study has examined their cartoonish representation in Arab News. The present study aims to study the cartoonish representation of the Middle Eastern crisis as illustrated in the Arab News. From this perspective, the study seeks to explore how such serious issues are illustrated in a bit of a witty way in the selected media discourse format. Moreover, how the selected cartoons point out the internal issues and the relevant causes, as per the perspectives of the cartoonist, is also the focus of the study. Mondry (2017) proclaims that "the power of the political cartoon lies not in the specific artist's intent or success at fostering change but in the degree to which, and how, the cartoonist taps the collective consciousness of readers (p. 79)".

In this regard, it would also help to comprehend the local Arab perspective on these issues. Al-Khalifa (2012) comments that Arab media has recently become active in giving coverage to contentious issues like terrorism, war, crisis, etc. For this purpose, Arab News was selected as the source sample. It is quite a popular English newspaper (online format) in the Middle East, published in Riyadh. Further,

the application of semiotic analysis to political cartoons facilitates the identification and examination of visual and linguistic components employed to communicate intended messages and influence public sentiment.

The research objectives are:

- To analyze the cartoons related to the selected Middle Eastern countries' dilemmas as portrayed in the Arab News
- To examine the semiotic signs used to represent the sources and nature of the issues (if given) related to the contemporary Middle Eastern world, as depicted in the selected cartoons

These objectives lead to the following question to be addressed in the study:

Q. How does the Arab News illustrate contemporary Middle Eastern dilemmas in the cartoons?

The research can render a significant contribution to the understanding of media discourse related to Middle Eastern countries' internal crises. Moreover, it seeks particular insights into the cartoons as meaningful signs. In this regard, the study would evaluate the role of cartoons as a vital means to depict serious issues like crises or conflicts. This is not just a simple representation of issues; but in fact, it is the highlighter to mark the source of disputes.

2. Literature Review

Discourses are always an important concern for scholars around the world, who want to delve deep into their meanings and interpret the intentions behind them. In this regard, the media discourse is often examined for meanings, as it is often grounded in political and capitalist domains of interest. Van Dijk (1996) comments, "properties of the social power of the media ..., not restricted to the influence of the media on their audiences, but [which] also involves the role of the media within the broader framework of the social, cultural, political, or economic power structures of society" (p.9). Among various forms of discourse, visuals have greater significance than others, as they are the most influential ways to attract the audience to their underlying messages. Albers, et al. (2009) comment that visual texts say more than what written texts can convey. Visual discourses are commonly seen as a form of communication that delivers meanings through the utilization of graphics, images, signs, expressions, light contrasts, colors, and other visual elements. According to Kress and Leeuwen (2006), visual discourses are the pictorial representations of social perceptions and/or conventions; thus they always have some underlying ideologies or narratives. The present study focuses on cartoons as a form of visual text that is often created with certain conscious or unconscious efforts to portray some bitter realities in a lighter mode. Mateus (2016) defines cartoons as a straight yet disguised form to reveal social issues. Cartoons are social works of art that are frequently fabricated in response to a social event "guided by socially determined intentions" (Stockl, 2004). As carriers of creeds, chronicles, and schemas, cartoons are very often the focus of analysis, and semiotics is the prime mode of visual discourse analysis used for such purposes.

The analysis of visual communication, particularly cartoons, is heavily influenced by the concept of semiotics (Hasanah & Hidayat, 2020), which is rooted in the study of signs and symbols. The framework proposed by semiotics studies how meaning is produced, communicated, and assumed through the use of a variety of signs, including visual and textual elements. This theoretical framework empowers the researchers to understand the functioning of symbols and depictions within related cultural and social contexts. Saussure (cited in Mehawesh, 2014) defines "semiology" speaking of semiotics, as "a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life (p. 253)" whereas Peirce (2014), considers it as a formal or quasi-essential notion of signs. Signs can be defined as meaningful entities that can be anything to represent some idea, object, or thought (Mendoza, 2016). Semiotics is closely associated with the study of signs to interpret and comprehend the underlying significance of these indications. Various semiotic theories are used by researchers to examine visual texts like cartoons, for example, Peirce theory, Visual grammar theory, Barthes theory, etc. Each of these theories elucidates the various features of signs presented in the visuals in different ways, but overall the agenda is the same, i.e., comprehension and interpretation of the core narrative. Many studies have also been carried out on the semiotic analysis of cartoons, for example, Lulu et al. (2022), Hasanah and Hidayat (2020), Mohamed Ahmed (2020), Tyumbu (2018), Al-Momani, Badarneh, and Migdadi (2017), etc.

Lulu et al. (2022) investigated how political cartoons represented the displacement issue of the Palestinian nation by using visual signs and symbols. The study revealed that various visual components helped the cartoonists build a strong narrative related to the Israel-Palestine conflict region. Hasanah and Hidayat (2020) studied political cartoons to scrutinize Anies Baswedan's first 100 days as a governor by using Peirce's theory of semiotic analysis. The study demonstrates that the symbols depicted in the political cartoons possess significant connotations, effectively communicating the aspirations of the Indonesian populace concerning the Anies administration. Mohamed Ahmed (2020) analyzed the political cartoons of online newspapers related to election campaigns in Egypt in 2018. He found that these political caricatures effectively conveyed the newspapers' concerns for the election candidates by relating them to traditional Egyptian signs like a genie, lamp, devil, etc. Another study was carried out by Tyumbu (2018) on the selected newspaper cartoon strips to identify the use of signifiers and signifieds in creating meaning. The study's findings indicate that political cartoons serve as a means of decoding signals, allowing cartoonists to comment on contemporary political topics and actors. Similarly, in another study conducted by Al-Momani, Badarneh, and Migdadi (2017), related to Jordanian political cartoons, the researchers used Barthes' semiotic model to examine the connection between signs and the meanings they conveyed. According to this study, the signs depicted in cartoons following political revolutions, such as the Arab Spring, have the tendency to strengthen the sense of togetherness inside the group by portraying favorable social and ideological principles. The above-mentioned studies depict that the semiotic study of cartoons helps researchers expose the underlying ideological stances and intended meanings of the cartoonist.

3. Research Method

The research method used in the study is qualitative, as it is based on the semiotic interpretation of the selected cartoons. The research uses qualitative content analysis techniques to understand and interpret the various types of signs used in the selected cartoons. For this purpose, the semiotic framework is used.

Semiotics is considered a systematic study of signs, where signs are defined as any meaningful entities. According to Mendoza (2016), signs can be anything like a word, a picture, an image, a voice note, or even a thought, etc. However, what is important is the implication of its use or connotation of the ideological strand to which it is connected. There are different theoretical paradigms available to analyze cartoons; however, the present study makes use of the Barthes model (1967, 1977 & 1998) with a prime focus on the model presented in 1977. This model studies signs from three perspectives: linguistic message, coded iconic message (connotative meaning), and non-coded iconic message (denotative meaning). All three message levels collectively help to examine the embedded ideologies and meanings of the visuals.

The cartoons are taken from the Arab News electronic edition published from January 2021 to May 2021. Arab News is one of the most popular English newspapers, published in Saudi Arabia. A total of 10 cartoons are selected related to the following Middle Eastern countries: Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen. These are the countries in the Middle East that have faced more crises than others. Moreover, as per the pilot study, these are also the ones that are frequently illustrated. To select cartoons related to each country, a purposive sampling method was used, based on the purpose: of cartoons focusing on the issues of the selected countries.

Each selected cartoon is individually analyzed according to Barthe’s theory, explained above. For this purpose, the content analysis method is used. The findings are presented in tabular forms and discussed later.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the results of the present study. There are ten cartoons in total representing six Middle Eastern countries (two cartoons for each country selected through purposive sampling method) that are analyzed.

The first set of cartoons selected for the analysis is related to Lebanon.



Figure 1. Cartoon 1 (Source: Arab News, <https://arab.news/m4rqf>)

The first cartoon represents the dilemma faced by Lebanon, which is the political class of the country. The following table presents the data:

Table 1. Cartoon 1 analysis

Linguistic Meaning	There are only two brief captions that are provided in the cartoon. The first caption depicts the context of the selected cartoon i.e. Lebanon. Whereas, the second caption “political class” is given to highlight the problematic class of the country.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
Bottle	A glass bottle filled with some contents	The bottle signifies a closed place that symbolizes the country.	The political class is the main cause of the suffering in Lebanon. They have made the common people of Lebanon suffer.
Cork	A cork tightly closing the bottle	The cork represents the situation that has placed the country in a prison-like place.	
Human Figure	A man captured inside the bottle	The human figure characterizes the country i.e. Lebanon wearing a traditional Lebanese dress.	



Figure 2. Cartoon 2 (Source: Arab News, <https://arab.news/zszpf>)

The second cartoon also represents the cause of an issue in Lebanon in a bit different way. Table 2 presents the results of the analysis.

Table 2. Cartoon 2 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	Three labels are used to denote the context of the cartoon. The first one is the country name “Lebanon”. The second one is the “political corruption” that is used to explain what the cartoon is about. Finally, the third label is “economic reforms”. All three labels help to convey the actual meaning of the cartoon that the country’s economic reforms are closed due to political corruption.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
File	A book or a file cover with a title	The book/ file related to the economic reforms of the country is closed	Lebanon needs serious economic reforms to get stable but political corruption is the main reason that it is impossible to carry out such reforms.
Lock	A lock or a closing device	Political corruption is acting as a lock that has closed the file	

The provided analysis of the two cartoons related to Lebanon exploits a blend of denotative and connotative meanings to read the message conveyed by these cartoons. The use of signs like cork, and bottle in the first picture helps to understand the difficult surviving conditions of the country. Whereas, in the second picture, the file cover and the lock clearly convey the idea of the economic downfall of the country, i.e., political corruption. In both cartoons, linguistic cues are brief but helpful to understand the context of the cartoons as the connotative meanings of the symbols used are precisely restricted (for example the connotations provided by the cork, human figure, and file are limited to context and not universally agreed upon).

The next cartoons are related to Iraq. Figure three below presents the actual image.



Figure 3. Cartoon 3 (Source: Arab News, <https://arab.news/ztby8>)

This image is the representation of the situation in Iraq, which is not in a stable form. The analysis is presented below in table 3.

Table 3. Cartoon 3 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	The only linguistic format used is the tag “Iraq” clarifying the context of the image.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
Human figure	A human figure represented as a sick man	The sick man is representing the country’s bad and critical condition.	The country of Iraq is suffering from a critical crisis situation that needs support to stay and survive. However, the support provided so far is further in a crunch. Overall, it is making the situation worse.
Hospital bed	The patient is lying on the hospital bed	The context is represented as a hospital bed which means the country is in need of crisis assistance.	
Oxygen cylinder	The patient is on an oxygen ventilator	The condition is worse thus support (ventilator to keep alive) is necessary.	
Fire	The oxygen tank is on fire thus producing smoke which is more dangerous for the patient.	The assistance provided is on fire as well and spoils the condition further.	



Figure 4. Cartoon 4 (Source: Arab News, <https://arab.news/p8axn>)

Table 4. Cartoon 4 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	The two tags provide information about the context and issue raised through the pictorial depiction. The first tag clarifies for the audience that the country represented is “Iraq”, whereas the second tag represents the issue.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
road	A damaged and broken road	The road represented the road taken to prosperity and progress by the Iraqi nation.	The cartoon depicts the terrible situation in which Iraq has been caught up. The militants and their chaotic activities have blocked its way forward, rather they have destroyed it.
Human figure	A human figure that looks tired and disappointed	The human figure represents the country Iraq which is in bad condition.	
missile	A missile hit the ground	The missile represents the militants (freedom fighters group) and their destructive activities.	

The next two cartoons portrayed the prevailing circumstances in Iraq. The analysis of both images yields a clear understanding of the message communicated through the signifiers. The depiction of a fatigued and sad human in image two, symbolizing the nation of Iraq, is an often employed symbol in political cartoons, serving as a means to effectively communicate the immense hardships endured by a country. However, akin to the aforementioned instances, the connotative implications of the signifiers exhibit idiosyncratic meanings and may lack consensus. In the first image, the interpretation of a sick person symbolizing the nation's precarious state and the hospital bed indicating the country's requirement for crisis assistance are subjective analyses. In both images, these symbols can be interpreted differently in different contexts. Likewise, the interpretation of the road depicted in the second image as a representation of Iraq's trajectory toward a prosperous future is open to individual interpretation. The linguistic tags are very helpful in both cartoons as they serve as contextual indicators to assist readers in comprehending the event to a certain extent.

The next cartoons are related to Yemen. The selected cartoons are presented with the analysis.

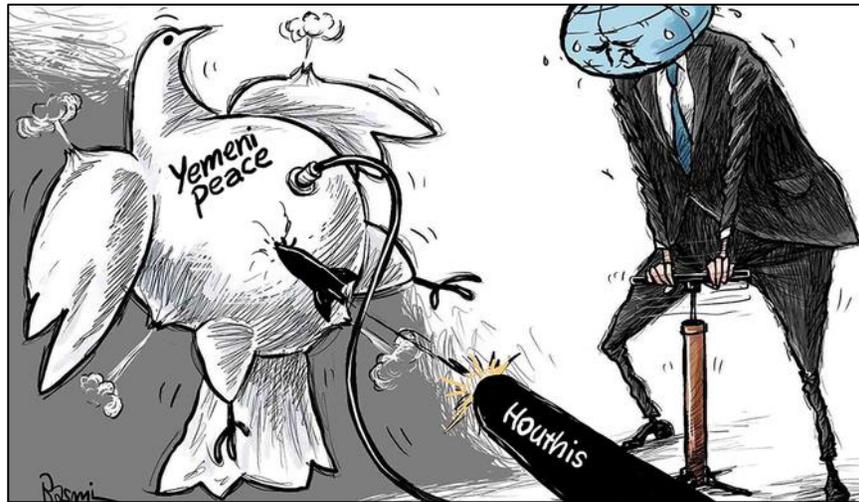


Figure 5. Cartoon 5 (Source: Arab News, <https://arab.news/87qc5>)

Table 5. Cartoon 5 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	The picture is provided with two captions. The first caption provides information about the context i.e. Yemeni Peace, whereas the second caption highlights the problematic source i.e. Houthis.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
Human figure a globe	A man properly dressed but with not a human head A world globe as head of a human figure	The man properly dressed up represents the world as the globe head makes it clear.	The world is trying hard to develop peace and prosperity in Yemen but the opponents' group has smashed this initiative. Thus, Yemen is facing critical peace-related issues due to these rebel groups.
A bird	An inflated white bird i.e. dove	The white peaceful dove represents Yemen as a country and in particular the peace process.	
Pump	The pump is used to fill the air in things.	The air pump depicts the world's efforts to provide peace in Yemen.	
A missile	A missile hits the bird	The missile represents the disparaging activities that have inflated the peace process in Yemen	
Launcher	A launcher from where a missile is fired.	The launcher depicts the Houthis group i.e. a fighter group in Islamic countries	



Figure 6. Cartoon 6 (Source: Arab News, <https://arab.news/r9xd2>)

Table 6. Cartoon 6 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	The cartoon carries three labels to identify and clarify the contextual information. The first one depicts the country Yemen, whereas the second label is Houthis (the rebels). The last label is provided to identify the figure as a peace process.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
Human figure 1	A human figure with a different head	The first human figure with a dove as its head represents peace.	The peace process cannot reach Yemen as the rebel party has destroyed all of the resources that can aid in establishing peace in the country.
A bird head	The head of a dove		
Human figure 2	A human figure with a non-human head	The second human figure with the head of an animal depicts the rebel group i.e. Houthis.	
Animal head	The head of an animal		
landscape	Two mountains	The landscape as a mountain represents Yemen as a country on one side, whereas the other mountain represents the landscape that is difficult to cross without a bridge.	
road	A road acting as a bridge	The road as a bridge represents the path that the peace process has to take to reach Yemen.	

The next two cartoons are related to the critical situation in Yemen. The analysis of the first cartoon provides a clear understanding of the meaning communicated by the signifiers. Both the denotative as well as the connotative meanings are clear. The use of dove and weapons are commonly used symbols for peace and destruction respectively, and thus are effectively used in the cartoons. However, in the second image, the idea that the human figure with the animal head represents the Houthis, or rebel organization, is an interpretation dependent on background information; the animal head by itself may not always indicate this. Thus, meanings are only clear because of the provided linguistic labels.

The next two cartoons are related to a sensitive Arab land area i.e. Palestine. Tables 7 and 8 present the analysis in detail.



Figure 7. Cartoon 7 (Source: Arab News, <https://arab.news/cv24c>)

Table 7. Cartoon 7 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	The cartoon has only two captions i.e. Gaza and Israel (the name of the countries). Gaza is a disputed area between Israel and Palestine.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
sea	A blue-colored sea with waves	The sea represents the world	This cartoon depicts one of the major issues of the Arab world i.e. Palestine-Israel conflict. The picture identifies Israel as a destructive force that has not only occupied the Palestinian land but also destroyed it. The area of Gaza is still under attack by Israel. The overall picture shows how Palestinian land has been captured forcefully and then destroyed by Israel. It shows the negative character of Israel as well as the chaos faced by Palestine because of this situation.
ship	A huge ship in bad condition. The ship also has a particular shape.	whereas the ship represents two countries Israel and Palestine. The particular shape of the ship also represents the area covered by these two countries on the map.	
Weapons machine	A huge machine loaded with weapons and in action	Israel is represented as a destroyer carrying weapons.	
Steel wires	Steel wires used as fences	Two areas on the ship are surrounded by fence wires showing them as separate contained areas. These two areas represent Palestine.	
Fire, flying objects, ashes, and smoke	One destroyed land area with flying objects, smoke, and fire, whereas the other one is already destroyed completely showing ashes.	Fire, smoke, and ashes represent destruction.	



Figure 8. Cartoon 8 (Source: Arab News <https://arab.news/nnn9w>)

Table 8. Cartoon 8 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	Two brief linguistic tags are used. The first one represents the focus of the picture, i.e. Palestinian cause, whereas the second one identifies the land gap as a division.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
Chair	A wooden chair	The wooden chair represents the Palestinian cause as provided through the label as well.	The division of opinions, beliefs, and policies regarding the Palestinian cause is an alarming situation for Palestine.
Man with scarf	A man sitting on the chair wearing the traditional Palestinian scarf	The man in the traditional costume of Palestine represents the common Palestinian population.	
opening	A huge opening in the middle of the land	The gap represents the division i.e. the division of opinions, beliefs, and policies over the matter.	

The next two cartoons epitomize the internal dilemmas of one of the subtle areas in the Middle Eastern lands, i.e. Palestine. It is a country where there is a long history of conflicts and wars. In both selected cartoons, the use of only two linguistic captions limits the efficacy of the message for viewers who are not already acquainted with the circumstances in Gaza and the Palestine-Israel struggle. A clear use of symbols is made like the ship to represent Israel and Palestine and the sea to represent the world. Moreover, the ship's shape as a depiction of the region on the map that the two countries occupy is another way to communicate the message. In the second image, the Palestinian cause is represented as a wooden chair which is a common way of portrayal of struggle in political cartoons. In the same image, the opening line in

the middle of the earth effectively represents the differences in opinions, attitudes, and political ideologies. The findings of this part are quite in conformity with the study conducted by Lulu, et al. (2022) that political cartoons can be an effective means to portray Palestinian cause. The next two pictures depict the problems associated with Libya and tables 9 and 10 provide the analysis.



Figure 9. Cartoon 9 (Source: Arab News <https://arab.news/5r6k5>)

Table 9. Cartoon 9 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	Two captions are used to identify the focus of the cartoon. The first one provides the detail of the relevant country, i.e. Libya with particular reference to the future of Libya. The second caption provides the details of another force in Libya i.e. militants. Overall, the linguistic content helps to understand the issue i.e. the two opposite forces in action in Libya.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
Sea	A blue-colored sea A huge elongated ship with passengers	The ship represents Libya in the world.	The image simply describes how the forces in Libya are operating against the future. It clarifies that all the militant forces are not in line with a good future for Libya.
Men	Five men row the boat. Four in one direction whereas the one in the opposite direction	The four men represent militant groups active in Libya, whereas the fifth person depicts the future of the country.	
oars	Pairs of oars used to move the boat	Oars represent a force required to move the country.	
weapons	Few men carrying weapons on their shoulders	Weapons also represent force here as militants' source of force.	



Figure 10. Cartoon 10 (Source: Arab News <https://arab.news/jt2xb>)

Table 10. Cartoon 10 Analysis

Linguistic Meaning	The two labels have been used in the above picture which helps to identify the subjects represented as “Mercenaries”, and “Libyan Peace”. The tags assist in comprehending the context of the picture.		
Sign	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Interpretation
Road	A road	The road depicts the pathway to prosperity and a peaceful future.	The cartoon portrays the destructive force that has blocked the way toward a peaceful Libya. The armed mercenaries are depicted as a hindrance to peace in the country.
Figure 1	A human with a covered face	The human figure represents mercenaries (the soldiers occupying Libya).	
Figure 2	Another human-shaped but bird-faced figure	The second figure illustrates peace	Weapons represent destructive force carried by mercenaries
Weapons	Weapons carried by a human figure	Weapons represent destructive force carried by mercenaries	
Dove	The bird dove as head	The dove as head and an olive branch	symbolize peace
Tree	A branch of an olive tree in the hand of a bird-faced-human figure		

The last two cartoons examined in the present study were related to the country Libya. In the first cartoon, Libya is represented as a struggling ship, whereas the world is represented as a sea. The image clearly conveys the message of how the country is trying to survive with the depiction of active forces shown as men on the ship. The use of the men rowing the boat in opposite directions, to represent the militants and the future of the country respectively, is enough to comprehend why there is no progress in any direction. Further, the use of symbols such as ship, sea, and then the oars are quite convincing in conveying the situation prevailing in the country. In the second picture symbolization of a peaceful Libya (dove as head) on the way to prosperity is again obstructed by the mercenary force. Thus both cartoons depict the militant group called mercenaries as the reason for internal chaos in the country. The use of weapons in both cartoons to represent the force of the militants is also effective in conveying the violence and conflict in the situation.

The image analysis carried out in this study aimed at describing the symbols used in the selected cartoons and extracting their meaning and interpretation. The findings of the study show that the symbols and brief linguistic labels serve well to illustrate issues faced by certain Middle Eastern countries. Thus, it is agreed that the semiotic examination of visual media to decipher its intended message can provide valuable insights as established by other researchers as well, for example, Lulu, et al. (2022), Hasanah and Hidayat (2020), Mohamed Ahmed (2020).

However, it is important to acknowledge several potential limitations encountered in this study. Most symbols were easily recognizable according to the explanatory message. Similarly, concerning the meaning of the concept, some symbols, such as the world and the sea dove, are also intelligible from a universal interpretation. However, most signs were not easily interpreted without background knowledge of linguistic content and context. The problem is that such meanings attributed to certain symbols are not always universally applicable and may reflect diversity in many cultural and socio-historical frameworks. Furthermore, the study also seems to rely on certain assumptions and generalizations regarding the interpretation of particular symbols.

6. Conclusion

The present research was carried out to reconnoiter Arab News cartoons and to comprehend the ways they illustrate the contemporary crises of some selected Middle Eastern countries. Cartoons featured in Arab news outlets are recognized as influential tools for communication and self-expression. This study examines the function of cartoons in both reflecting and influencing public opinion, while also exploring their capacity to question prevailing narratives and stimulate critical thinking among viewers. For this purpose, the semiotic theory by Barthes (1977) was used to study the linguistic, denotative, and connotative meanings of the symbols and signs used in the selected cartoons.

The results expose that the selected cartoons effectively depict several internal reasons that have caused trouble in the selected regions. From political reasons to corruption in Lebanon, militant forces in Iraq, Houthis interruption in Yemen, mercenaries' role in Libya, and Israel's adventures in Palestine, all dilemmas have been brilliantly portrayed through the use of cartoons. The study signifies the role of cartoons in effectively portraying such harsh realities. Moreover, the results of this study demonstrate how linguistic comprehension is effective if a message is effectively communicated in the realm of political cartoons. The use of caricatures can enable the development of complex concepts and themes simple and well-made. However, it is important to acknowledge that the analysis of cartoons is subjective and changes depending on the viewer's background knowledge, life experience, and personal beliefs so it is important to explore the political meaning of language in visuals, and also understand different perspectives and possible interpretations. The study also identifies the limited role of certain signs, from a semiotic perspective, in interpretation in the absence of linguistic messages.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Ansa Hameed and Dr. Haroon N. Alsager were responsible equally for all the stages of the research, from conceptualizing idea to

producing the final draft.

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