

Arab Political Cartoon as a Response to the Foreign and Domestic Policies of the State

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An analysis of the phenomenon of Arabic cartoons could provide rich material not only for orientalists, but also for specialists in different fields. Today, Arab cartoons are experiencing a revival. The Internet greatly affects the form and quality of information material. The study of Arabic cartoons assumes a versatile approach: we are interested not only in the content of the cartoon, but also in its additional characteristics. In a cartoon the reader receives information as quickly and concisely as possible. The most indicative and interesting for the researcher is the analysis of the material in a certain time frame. Through cartoon, we can observe how the initial image of a particular politician or party forms and how public perception of them changes over time. Political cartoons are interesting to observe in dynamics. An analysis of cartoons as a response to a political situation should be conducted in accordance with the scheme: a political situation — the pro-government and/or oppositional reaction of society — the appearance of cartoons covering this topic. To fully understand political cartoons, the reader must possess an understanding of the general political situation in the world and be aware of the details of the foreign and domestic policies of individual countries.

Keywords: political cartoons, caricature, politics, the Arab world, society, reaction.

Only a limited number of Russian studies focus on modern Arabic cartoons¹. Meanwhile, an analysis of this phenomenon could provide rich material not only for orientalists, but also for specialists in such fields as philology, history, sociology, politics and economics.

Cartoon is multifaceted: it can be studied both as an independent type of fine art, and as a social phenomenon that carries a semantic load. The functions of cartoons are also varied, but its main task is to visually inform the reader about events, usually with a comic effect, and thereby provide food for thought [1, p. 425–426].

Political cartoons are a common and important type of satirical drawing. An analysis of political cartoons makes it possible to identify the most important topics for society, since, among other things, they are a response to various events of domestic or foreign policy. Very often political cartoons are commissioned by candidates during election campaigns. This type of cartoon is primarily used to draw the reader's attention to the most important issues facing society.

This study of Arabic cartoons assumes a versatile approach: we are interested not only in the content of the cartoon, but also in its additional characteristics. For example, is the

¹ According to A. G. Belova, Dr. Sci. in Philology, the study of Arabic cartoons was not encouraged in Soviet times (author's note).



Fig. 1. "Unanimous". Available at: <http://theworldobserver.com> (accessed: 20.08.2021)



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Fig. 2. "Prices for rice, milk and other commodities have returned to the level they were before". Caption below: "April Fool's Day joke". Available at: <http://theworldobserver.com> (accessed: 20.08.2021)

cartoon intended for a pan-Arab audience (Fig. 1) or is its meaning clear only to residents of a particular Arab country? In this regard, it is interesting to analyze the language of cartoon: it can use both the literary Arabic language and the dialect used in a particular country. Fig. 2 shows an example of an Egyptian cartoon, which can be guessed by the characteristic dialectal features.



Fig. 3. “Rise, Egypt! Dry your tears! The entire Arab world longs for your return”. Available at: <https://www.klma.org/arts/> (accessed: 20.08.2021)



Fig. 4. Untitled. Available at: http://ahmedaldosokysora.blogspot.com/2013/01/blog-post_28.html (accessed: 20.08.2021)

The most indicative and interesting for the researcher is the analysis of the material in a certain time frame. Through cartoon, we can observe how the initial image of a particular politician or party forms and how public perception of them changes over time. One of the striking examples is President Muhammad Morsi. First, he appears in cartoons in the form of Salah ad-Din, as a symbol of the liberation of the Egyptian people, or is depicted bending over a woman wiping away her tears — the image of Egypt (Fig. 3). The cartoon was published after the announcement of the results of the second round of the presidential elections in Egypt on June 25, 2012². Later, in 2013, the cartoons completely change color: Morsi is shown showing a biceps that disappears, deflating like a balloon (Fig. 4).

Political cartoons are interesting to observe in dynamics. An analysis of cartoons as a response to a political situation should be conducted in accordance with the scheme: a political situation — the pro-government and/or oppositional reaction of society — the appearance of cartoons covering this topic. It is important for the Arab community to

² Muhammad Morsi officially became the fifth President of Egypt on June 30, 2012.



Fig. 5. Untitled. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/KarykatwrAlrb/> (accessed: 20.08.2021)*

.. تحالف ..



Fig. 6. "Union". Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/KarykatwrAlrb/> (accessed: 20.08.2021)*

study the reaction of individual Arab countries. A reverse situation is cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, which caused unrest in society [2, p. 148–149]³.

Let us trace the process of the formation of public response expressed through cartoons using the example of the events of the end of 2017, when the United States officially announced the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It was not difficult to predict the reaction of the Arab community to the decision. The subsequent series of cartoons dedicated to this event clearly demonstrates it (Figs 5, 6).

While the US statement regarding the status of Jerusalem was perceived unambiguously by the Arab society, the intervention of a number of Arab states in the internal conflict of Yemen caused heated debates⁴. For example, the work of the Saudi cartoonist

³ A series of drawings, first by the Danish artist Christopher Zieler, and later by the French magazine Charlie Hebdo, caused a protest from the entire Muslim world.

* Meta is recognized in the Russian Federation as an extremist organization.

⁴ In 2015, a number of Arab states began military intervention in the internal Yemeni conflict, directed against the Ansar Allah Movement (Houthi rebels).



Fig. 7. “The coalition defends. Armed groups defend themselves”. Available at: <https://www.okaz.com.sa/multimedia/caricature/1708730> (accessed: 23.08.2021)

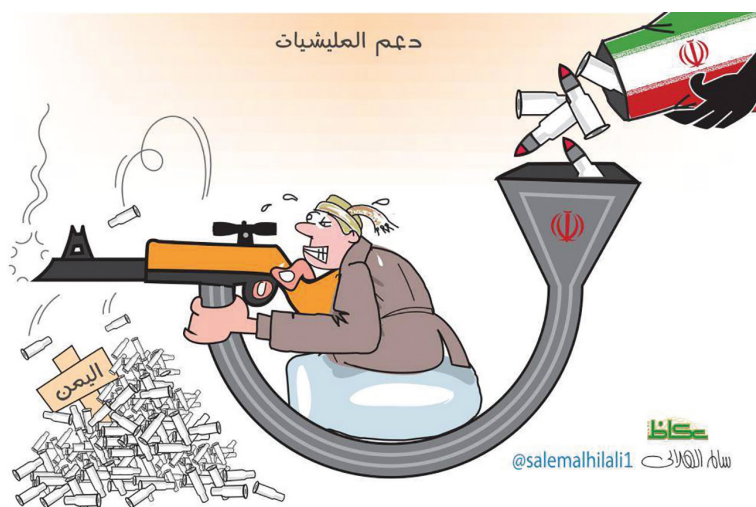


Fig. 8. “Support for military groups”. Available at: <https://www.okaz.com.sa/multimedia/caricature/1708730> (accessed: 23.08.2021)

Salem al-Khalili presents a whole series of illustrations dedicated to this topic and reflecting the official position of the KSA authorities. The cartoons appeared on the pages of the Saudi daily *Okaz*⁵, which has been published since 1960. In one cartoon, the Saudi coalition in the guise of a soldier defends the children behind him and the hospital building, while a member of the paramilitary Houthi group depicted as a man wearing national clothes is trying to escape hiding behind the backs of the children and the hospital (Fig. 7).

In another cartoon, Salem al-Khalili emphasizes Iran’s role in supporting the Houthis and, accordingly, blames it for fomenting the conflict (Fig. 8).

⁵ عكاظ — Okaz (the historical name of the fair near the city of Mecca, where traditional poetry competitions were held).



Fig. 9. “Houthi rockets facing Saudi Arabia”. Available at: <https://www.youm7.com/story/2019/9/17/> (accessed: 02.09.2021)

A similar position is presented in a cartoon published in the Saudi newspaper “The Seventh Day”. The illustration depicts Iran in the form of a man who is prevented by rockets from setting fire to Saudi Arabia with a torch with the inscription “Houthis” (Fig. 9). The cartoon was published on the website of the edition in September 2019.

A disproportionately large number of Arab cartoons covering the aforementioned military conflict emphasize the role of Saudi Arabia in the war and unequivocally blame the country and its allies for the destruction of Yemen and the enormous loss of life among the civilian population.

In June 2019, the Yemeni newspaper al-Masa bars⁶ published a cartoon clearly illustrating an opinion completely opposite to the official position of Saudi Arabia. The image shows a Saudi in bloody clothes, at his feet the body of a murdered child and human bones with the signature “Yemen”, in his hands he holds a submachine gun and a photo of the baby, which the camera captures in close-up. The caption on the screen of the camera broadcasting the image reads: “The Houthis are killing the children of Taiz” (Fig. 10).

Earlier, in June 2018, the Lebanese-based Islam Times, an Arab publication, published a cartoon depicting Saudi Arabia’s role in the destruction of Yemen. The illustration contains a depiction of wreckage with the words “Economy”, “Government”, “Army”, “Schools”, over which the national flag of Yemen is visible. Nearby stands a figure of a man with the GCC flag⁷, a bloody hammer in his hand. The text says, “And now we can look for a solution (to get out of) the Yemeni crisis” (Fig. 11).

Finally, one more opinion about the current situation was reflected in the cartoon published by the Yemeni newspaper Buiming⁸ back in 2015. In this image, a man dressed

⁶ المساء برس (in Arabic).

⁷ Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC).

⁸ نميوب (in Arabic).



Fig. 12. “Happy Yemen with a new face”. Available at: <https://boyemen.com/gallery.php> (accessed: 02.09.2021)

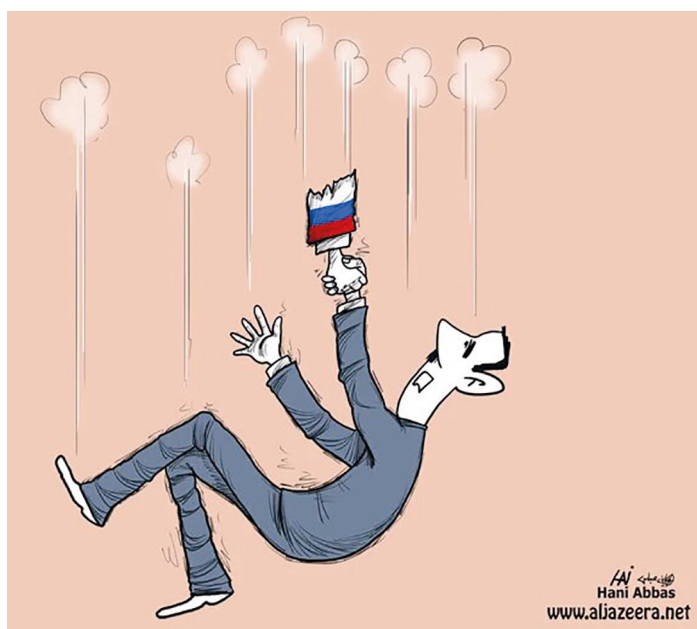


Fig. 13. “Russia’s withdrawal from Syria”. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/caricature/2016/3/15/> (accessed: 02.09.2021)

In March 2016, Al-Jazeera, a pan-Arab online publication, published a cartoon titled “Russia’s withdrawal from Syria” (Fig. 13).

A cartoonist working under the pen name Fares posted on Twitter a much tougher cartoon, including one that emphasizes the role of Russia in the current political situation in Syria. In the image, the carcass of a camel — a symbol of the Syrian nation — is being torn apart by various animals. Russia is represented in the form of a bear, the USA in the form of an eagle, the UK in the form of a lion and Iran in the form of a dog. The snake coiled around the leg of the dead camel represents Israel. Nearby, buried its head in the

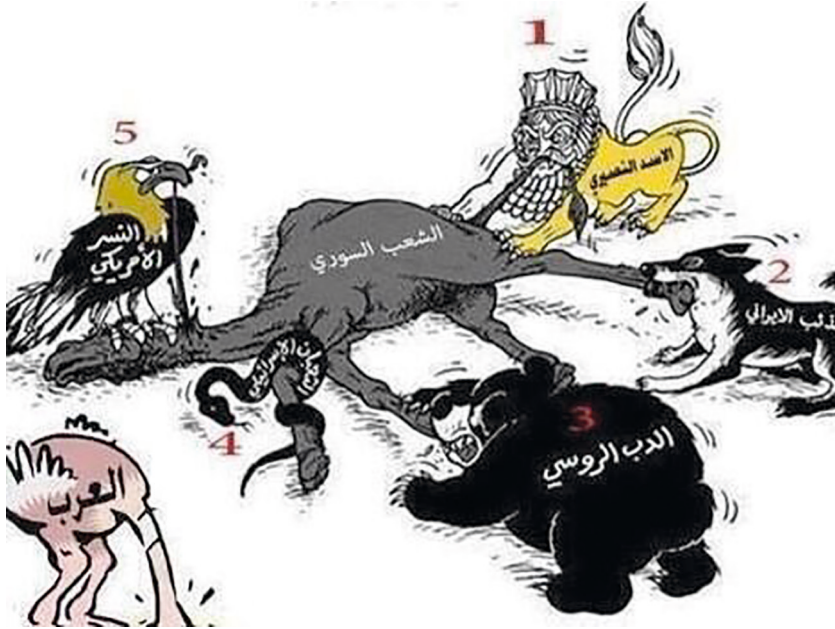


Fig. 14. Untitled. Available at: https://twitter.com/creators_/status/337424727008215040?lang=fr (accessed: 02.09.2021)

sand, stands an ostrich, which represents the position of the rest of the Arab world regarding the situation with Syria (Fig. 14).

Al-Jazeera often emphasizes the friendly relations between Russia and Iran (Fig. 15).

Sharif Arafa, a cartoonist who works for the famous Egyptian news magazine *Rosa al-Yusuf*, portrayed Russia as a fighter against terrorism. The cartoon depicts Russia again as a bear aiming a gun at the Jabhat al-Nusra monster⁹. Turkey stands next to it, turning away (Fig. 16).

The artist Firas Hajaj depicted Russia as a wounded bear, hinting at its lost power (Fig. 17).

However, in March 2018, the Syrian pro-government publication SY24 posted a cartoon of a different content on the pages of its online publication. In the illustration, Russia is represented as a huge man in general's shoulder straps (Fig. 18).

The issue of depersonalization, conditional anonymity of political cartoons is also important: as a rule, authors avoid mentioning specific names of political figures¹⁰ even if the features of their faces are quite recognizable. The reason is the redundancy of additional comments: the reader should understand the image without complicated explanations. However, in some cases, such depersonalization may be associated with censorship, in other cases with an attempt to make the image more universal [4].

The authorship of cartoons, including political ones, as a rule, does not raise any questions: the authors put their signature on the images, or use veiled signs: for example, the same image appears on every cartoon of the author. Thus, the famous Palestinian car-

⁹ Jabhat al-Nusra is the branch of the international Islamist terrorist organization Al-Qaeda operating in Syria and Lebanon.

¹⁰ Sometimes, instead of proper names the following words are used: *deputy, president, mayor* etc.



www.aljazeera.net عامر الزعبي

Fig. 15. "Iran, Israel and Russia". Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/caricature/2015/12/21/> (accessed: 02.09.2021)



Fig. 16. "Fight against terrorism". Available at: <https://www.tomatocartoon.com/2019/09/> (accessed: 02.09.2021)

toonist Naji al-Ali created the recognizable image of Handala — a barefoot boy in darned clothes, standing with his back to the viewer with his hands clasped behind [3, p. 14]. The character appeared in all the works of the cartoonist and became a kind of national symbol and personification of the Palestinian people (Figs 19, 20)¹¹.

¹¹ In Abdallah's cartoons on social themes, a black cat plays the role of the author's signature (see the author's page on Facebook*: <https://www.facebook.com/AbdallahCartoon/>).

* Meta is recognized in the Russian Federation as an extremist organization.



Fig. 17. "Russia today". Available at: <https://m.facebook.com/ShehabAgency.MainPage/photos/a> (accessed: 02.09.2021)*



Fig. 18. "Russia and the UN". روسيا والأمم المتحدة | SY24 (sy-24.com) (accessed: 02.09.2021)

The inscription on the poster reads: "I came to Mecca to fight against atheistic communism".

While cartoonists have a quite recognizable style they tend to choose the most preferable topic for themselves from politics to socio-economic problems. Thus, even the absence of a caption does not make the work completely anonymous.

Today, Arab cartoons are experiencing a revival. The Internet greatly affects the form and quality of information material. It is easier for an Internet user to perceive an idea expressed in the form of a drawing, meme or cartoon¹². Users prefer images with minimum or no text (Figs 21, 22).

¹² The number of views and likes with which users mark cartoons on the pages of Internet publications confirm this statement.

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Fig. 19. “(The purpose of) his pilgrimage is approved”. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/hanthala.1/> (accessed: 02.09.2021)*



Fig. 20. “Every Muslim is (a priori) guilty until proven guilty”. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/hanthala.1/> (accessed: 02.09.2021)*

* Meta is recognized in the Russian Federation as an extremist organization.



Fig. 21. "American flag policy". Available at: <https://karikatir.wordpress.com/page/4/> (accessed: 02.09.2021)



Fig. 22. "War during Covid-19". الحرب في زمن الكورونا! (alaraby.co.uk) (accessed: 02.09.2021)

Cartoons are a relevant and interesting phenomenon to study. They can convey to the reader clearly and quickly the nuances and details of the situation, as well as provide the author's take on it. In a cartoon the reader receives information as quickly and concisely as possible. However, it should be borne in mind that cartoons are never objective, since they are always an expression of the point of view of the author of the work or that of the author's client. To fully understand political cartoons, the reader must possess an understanding of the general political situation in the world and be aware of the details of the foreign and domestic policies of individual countries.

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Арабская политическая карикатура как ответ на внешнюю и внутреннюю политику государства

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Изучению современной арабской карикатуры посвящено ограниченное количество отечественных исследований. Однако анализ этого явления мог бы предоставить богатый материал не только для востоковедов, но и для специалистов в области филологии, истории, социологии, политики и экономики. Карикатура многогранна: ее можно изучать и как самостоятельный вид изобразительного искусства, и как общественное явление, несущее в себе смысловую нагрузку. Функции карикатуры также разнообразны, но основная ее задача заключается в том, чтобы визуально информировать читателя о событиях, как правило, с комическим эффектом, и давать тем самым пищу для размышления. Политическая карикатура — распространенный и актуальный вид сатирического рисунка. Анализ политической карикатуры позволяет выявить наиболее важные и острые для общества темы, так как через карикатуру происходит отклик на различные события внутренней и внешней политики. Нередко политическая карикатура является специальным заказом в период предвыборных кампаний. Однако в первую очередь этот вид карикатуры используется авторами, чтобы привлечь внимание читателя к наиболее важным вопросам. Изучение арабской карикатуры предполагает разносторонний подход: для исследователя интересна не только содержательная составляющая карикатуры, но и ее дополнительные характеристики. Анализ политической карикатуры невозможен без понимания общей политической ситуации в мире и внимания к деталям внешней и внутренней политики отдельных стран. Вместе с тем именно благодаря карикатуре зритель получает информацию максимально сжато и быстро.

Ключевые слова: карикатура, политика, арабский мир, общество, реакция.

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