



No Sharp Turns: Neutrality in Jordanian Media Discourse on the War in Ukraine

Jona Fras• and Yousef Barahmeh••

Abstract

The Jordanian government has officially adopted a ‘neutral’ foreign policy position on the war in Ukraine since 2022, providing an interesting case for examining media responses to conflict in a context where official positions are often supported and reproduced by media participants. To examine whether the official position on the war in Ukraine was reproduced by Jordanian media participants, we conducted an exploratory analysis of episodes of three Jordanian political discussion programs broadcast on the state-owned Al-Mamlaka and on the privately-owned Roya TV. Frame analysis, which focused on problem definition, assignment of responsibility, and proposed remedies, provided mixed evidence towards a neutral orientation in the discussion programs. Discourse analysis of selected topics further revealed the complex management of stances towards the conflict, through nominalization, strategic contestation, and scaling axes of space, such as physical distancing, domesticating issues, and regional parallels, due to the need to respond to locally relevant narratives affecting Jordanians directly. These findings demonstrate the complexity of media positions in Jordan’s context of official neutrality on the war in Ukraine, acknowledging the role of locally prominent narratives in representations of conflict through linguistic, interactional, and media-historical dynamics.

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, representing a major escalation in a conflict that had been ongoing since 2014. The impact of the resulting war has been felt around the world, impacting food security, energy prices, and flows of refugees, which

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- Lecturer in Arabic, Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom
 - Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Department of English Language and Literature, Isra University, Jordan



disrupted communities and global supply chains. The policy and media responses to the war have now been well researched, but mostly either in Western or Russian contexts. Most studies have focused on the support exhibited in the media for either side in the conflict (Hanley et al. 2022a, Blackburn 2023, Ononiwu 2023, Ptaszek et al. 2023). Less attention has been paid, however, to countries that have not been directly involved in the war, but still potentially experienced its impact – perhaps making up most of the world – and whose diplomatic and media positions could be more complex.

Jordan is an interesting case in this respect, both due to its policy response and its media context. While traditionally a key ally of the United States, Jordan's official foreign policy stance promoted a diplomatically neutral position in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion, including negotiations and a resolution to the conflict, a position the former government spokesperson Sakher Dudin described vividly as a policy of “no sharp turns” (AmmanNet 2021). Jordanian media, on the other hand, presents the example of a controlled media environment where restrictive national security laws and ownership structures provide significant constraints on media discourse (Sakr 2013, Duffy and Maarouf 2015, Mahadeen 2020, Barahmeh and Fras 2023). This led us to look at how a relatively neglected policy position on the Ukraine war – that of *neutrality* – might reflect in a media context that has also been underexplored in relation to this war. We focused on a small, non-Western country with moderate constraints on free expression, where a surface understanding might expect the government position to be reflected wholesale in media discussions.

As an initial exploratory study, we chose to focus on three discussion programs broadcast on Jordanian television stations: the foreign affairs program *al-Ashira* (العاشرة) and the domestic-oriented program *Sawt al-Mamlaka* (صوت المملكة) on the state-owned Al-Mamlaka, and the domestic affairs program *Nabd al-Balad* (نبض البلد) on the privately owned Roya. We analyzed a sample of the programs for identifiable frames (Entman 1993) as a way of examining the representations of the war by broadcasters and other participants in media discourse, in particular whether ‘neutral’ frames – ones that do not assign responsibility to either side – might predominate. However, we also realized that frame analysis can be quite limited because it focuses on descriptions, flattening nuance, and neglecting important themes that might fall outside the definition of a frame. For this reason, we also used discourse analysis to examine the representation of the “stances” (Du Bois 2007) of media participants towards the war in Ukraine, specifically on topics which produced tension and potentially challenged a neutral position.



We argue that understanding discourse is key to explaining the complex relationship between official Jordanian ‘neutrality’ and the management of stances towards the conflict by individual media participants. This is often demonstrated through discursive maneuvers that do not always fit neatly into binary models of assigning responsibility. This underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to representations of conflict that acknowledges linguistic, interactional, and media-historical dynamics, rather than focusing merely on issue framing or ideological/narrative contestation, or biases about media reproducing official viewpoints. Moreover, studying a broader range of media responses in a country such as Jordan contributes to further developing understandings of media representations of conflict in a broader array of media contexts beyond Western settings. Although exploratory, we see Jordanian discussion programs as a useful, focused case study that provides the basis for future cross-media and cross-national comparisons as well.

To achieve these aims, our analysis was guided by the following research questions:

- 1- How is neutrality framed in Jordanian media discussions of the war in Ukraine?
- 2- In what capacity do Jordanian mediated discourse strategies complicate and/or negotiate this neutrality?

Showing the complexity of Jordanian media stances would, in this way, contribute to broader debates on media framing of conflict in controlled media environments and beyond.

Literature review

From the mid-twentieth century onward, Jordan’s foreign policy has been characterized by close relationships with Western powers in general, and the U.S. in particular, combined with a concern for maintaining domestic economic and political stability (Brand 1994, Ryan 2004). Over the past two decades, however, King Abdullah II’s pragmatic foreign policy has also meant the cultivation of relations with other global actors, including Russia. This included developing a strategic “coordination relationship” since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011 (Al Sharif 2022), and the King’s visit to Moscow in 2021 (Jordan Times 2021).

With the 2022 war in Ukraine, Jordan’s foreign policy has steered more towards ‘neutrality’ than support for either side in the war. On February 27, 2022, the Jordanian foreign ministry formalized the country’s “neutral” position on the war in Ukraine and called for peaceful negotiations



between the two sides (Almasri 2022). In April 2022, Jordan abstained from a vote to condemn Russia's invasion at the United Nations, both an effort to preserve both diplomatic and economic ties with Russia and an example of Jordan's policy of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs (Alghabin 2022). Preserving this policy has made it necessary for Jordan to walk a "diplomatic tightrope" (Al Sharif 2022) without aggravating either Russia or Ukraine and its Western supporters. One concern has been the impact of the war on Jordan itself, particularly the economic effects of sanctions on Russia and reductions in Ukrainian food exports (The National 2022).

Although Jordan is a country that is, at best, a peripheral actor in the war in Ukraine, it has been potentially exposed to the negative impacts of the war. Thus, the Jordanian case matters because neutrality on the Ukraine war is a context that has not received much attention in scholarship, compared to explorations of more partisan Russian or Ukrainian "media ecosystems" (Hanley et al. 2022b). Moreover, Jordan provides an interesting case study of a relatively controlled media environment. Broadcast media in Jordan is heavily impacted by ownership structures and government influence, most notably the lack of civil society representation in media organizations (Zaidah 2015), the restrictive impact of national security laws (Sakr 2013, Duffy and Maarouf 2015, Mahadeen 2020, Barahmeh and Fras 2023), and the direct reproduction of government narratives in news coverage (Zaidah 2014). Studies of media content in Jordan, including print media, news websites, and television, have therefore suggested that these dynamics contribute to reproducing hegemonic stances of pro-regime and patriarchal elites (Mahadeen 2015, Hawatmeh 2020). Thus, it is now interesting to examine the extent to which broadcast media, in fact, reproduce government foreign policy positions, such as neutrality on the war in Ukraine, and whether there is scope for contestation.

Jordan's foreign policy appears to lie beyond the bounds of public debate, partly because it is led by the King himself and partly because the political structure of the country grants the monarch broad powers over foreign affairs and national security. Nevertheless, foreign policy is frequently referenced and discussed in Jordanian domestic media discourse, particularly when state-run channels such as Al-Mamlaka host the Foreign Minister or local political analysts. Even in more pluralistic media environments, the extent to which media discussions reflect government understandings of foreign policy can vary significantly, from reproducing to more broadly challenging government positions on individual conflicts (Entman 2004, Goddard et al. 2008, Ojala and Pantti 2017, Lichtenstein and Koerth 2022). Similarly, the Jordanian case is quite complex.



Following Hallin's (1986) model of the three spheres of public discourse in news reporting and media framing, Jordan's *existing* official policy falls within the *sphere of consensus*, meaning it is treated as uncontroversial and, therefore, not open to public debate. In contrast, discussions of Jordan's *preferred* role or positioning in the regional or global arena appear to fall within the *sphere of legitimate controversy*, allowing space for more diverse framings and voices. Our analysis of Jordanian discussion programs thus reveals some complex discursive processes that sometimes align with, but occasionally also challenge, the presumed official position.

Studying constructions of Jordanian 'neutrality' also has relevance beyond the Jordanian context alone. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, studies of media framing of the Russia-Ukraine conflict have mostly focused on either various European countries or Russia (Ojala and Pantti 2017, Lichtenstein et al. 2019, Khaldarova 2021, Lichtenstein and Koerth 2022). Studies of the conflict since the 2022 full-scale invasion have followed a similar trend. Blackburn (2023) identifies a uniform pro-Ukrainian stance on part of the UK media, which both reflected the UK government stance and supported prolonging the conflict.

On the Russian side, news sources framed issues consistently with Russian government positions, while comparisons with Ukrainian news media have similarly identified competing biases reflecting the two sides' positions (Ononiwu 2023, Ptasek et al. 2023). Scholars have also identified opposing narratives surfacing in other contexts, for example in China, where a significant Russian impact on the framing of the conflict is evident (Hanley et al. 2022b, Zhabotynska and Ryzhova 2022). However, less attention has been paid to smaller countries with neutrality as their stated foreign policy position.

It is important here to clarify our understanding of 'neutrality' in this study. Neutrality in the media has sometimes been considered as a journalistic goal, an ideal of detachment or objectivity sought to be achieved by broadcasters (Tuchman 1972, Schudson 2001); but it can also be understood as a practice of balancing opposing voices on the "sides" of any debate (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2016). However, both conceptions follow Anglo-American ideals of journalistic practice, which is not necessarily applicable in contexts such as Jordan; indeed, many non-Western countries view interventionist journalism as a more desirable objective than neutrality (Fahmy and Elhamy 2025).

Similar to other countries in the Global South, we argue here that Jordan's overall media context may be more productively viewed as



possessing a “culture of restraint” (Paul and Sosale 2025) in journalism. We acknowledge the sharper legal and political boundaries of a controlled media environment, but we also focus on collaboration and information dispersal as opposed to replicating Western values of what reporting should be. In any case, we do not focus on the practice of ideal of *journalistic* neutrality as such, but rather neutrality as an official Jordanian government foreign policy position on a particular conflict, *towards which* participants in Jordanian media discourse orient themselves in their communicative practice. An overall context of *official* neutrality could be reproduced by media participants by, for example, promoting a responsibility frame which does not assign too much blame to either side in the conflict, or by distancing themselves from the conflict altogether; or it could be challenged by media participants, by assigning blame to one party in the conflict, or by expressing commitment to a partisan solution to the war.

We approach stance theory as a form of evaluation, positioning, and alignment towards particular issues made by social actors (Goffman 1981, Du Bois 2007), covering both broader evaluating phenomena such as framing and more fleeting instances of discourse, to convey a sense of individual agency in communication that is nevertheless restricted by aspects of broader context. While we acknowledge there are likely differences in terms of the relative power and ability of participants in media discourse – between hosts and guests, for example, or between media employees and ordinary citizens participating through video calls – we are more interested in the array of discursive strategies for stance-taking than in the relative prominence or promotion of any one particular stance. This is important to consider because the way media participants represent conflict, or respond to official positions, is not always merely descriptive (as might be suggested by framing theory). It also involves linguistic and interactional cues, and aspects of local media history, processes involved in evaluation and alignment strategies that are better conceptualized through the notion of stance-taking.

Methodology

In this study, we employ a qualitative research design that combines frame analysis and discourse analysis to examine Jordanian media discourse on the ongoing war in Ukraine. Data was collected from two Jordanian media institutions, Al-Mamlaka (state-owned) and Roya (private), specifically their YouTube channels, chosen primarily for accessibility purposes¹. We analyzed episodes of three Jordanian TV programs dealing with the war in Ukraine: al-

¹ One of the authors is based outside Jordan.



Ashira, a foreign affairs program on Al-Mamlaka; *Sawt al-Mamlaka*, a domestic affairs program also on Al-Mamlaka; and *Nabd al-Balad*, a discussion program on Roya. Selecting two discussion programs from Al-Mamlaka and one from Roya TV allowed for a meaningful comparison of two domestic-oriented programs with a program focusing on foreign affairs. These programs provided also a meaningful density of debates, topics, and guests that focused on the war in Ukraine as a discrete topic.

Discussion programs were chosen because they are broadcast on widely watched Jordanian television channels and are also accessible to many Jordanians through YouTube and social media re-posts. The latter consideration makes audio-visual media a solid choice of a platform that promotes and responds to official discourse with a relatively broad audience reach – something which is not always the case, for example, for print or written digital media. Audiovisual media are also generally more interesting and engaging, although we acknowledge that an analysis of datasets of printed or written digital media could provide an alternative way of answering our research questions.

We included episodes broadcast between February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, and December 31, 2022, to capture both the initial phase of the war – when it dominated coverage across Jordanian news channels – as well as later periods, when it gradually gave way to other newsworthy events. During this time period, 583 video segments (episodes) from *al-Ashira* were posted on Al-Mamlaka's YouTube channel, of which we identified 123 videos – 21.1 % of the total – as discussing the Ukraine war. However, due to the large number of videos, a sample of 20 was selected randomly for analysis, as a representative corpus with sufficient data analytical saturation that was nevertheless manageable to transcribe, translate, and code within the time and resource limitations of the authors.

Another consideration was allowing for comparability with the domestic-oriented programs, for which less material was available. In the target period, we identified only one episode of *Sawt al-Mamlaka* and nine episodes of *Nabd al-Balad* that discussed the war in Ukraine, all of which could be transcribed, translated, and coded, meaning sampling was not necessary. The full sample is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of programs and episodes in the sample.

Program name	Ownership	Relevant episodes identified within timeframe	Episodes analyzed	Sampling approach
<i>al-Ashira</i>	State-owned	123	20	Random sampling
<i>Sawt al-Mamlaka</i>	State-owned	1	1	Full sample
<i>Nabd al-Balad</i>	Privately owned	9	9	Full sample



Most of the episodes were broadcast in February and March 2022, when the conflict was high on the news agenda. Despite the low overall episode count, we included both of these programs in order to provide visibility over both state-owned (*Sawt al-Mamlaka*) and private-owned (*Nabd al-Balad*) broadcasters. Enumerating frames and percentages of frames within broadcasts still allowed some comparability. However, it is important to note that our sample was exploratory and uneven, although strategically selected, and the comparison across the programs is not symmetrical. The findings are, furthermore, limited to the way Jordanian discussion programs represent the topic; while these are an important avenue for many Jordanians to consume media, through YouTube clips shared on social media, we acknowledge the findings may not be more broadly generalizable.

We analyzed the content of the episodes using a two-phase approach. First, to gain a broad view of the extent to which neutrality was promoted by media participants, we focused on responsibility frames. We draw on Entman's (1993) definition of frame theory, whereby framing emphasizes the salience of a phenomenon by identifying problems and the causal interpretation of these problems, in addition to moral evaluations and recommended treatments. Responsibility frames view causal interpretation as the responsibility of one actor for the 'problem' that defines the frame. Thus, they are relevant for a study of neutrality: a frame can be considered 'neutral' if it does not clearly assign responsibility to one side in a conflict or assigns equal blame to both. By contrast, a frame that assigns responsibility to one actor – either pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian/pro-Western – is not a neutral frame.

Like Lichtenstein et al. (2019), we chose to limit our analysis of frame content to problem definition, causal interpretation, and treatment recommendation alone. For our approach, focusing on moral evaluation is less meaningful because, when studying responsibility frames in the context of neutrality, a negative moral evaluation is already implicit whenever specific actors are "blamed" for causing the problem (Lichtenstein et al. 2019, 74). While positive moral evaluations likely do feature in the data, they would be more relevant in a study based on responsibility for proposed solutions or remedies, which we do not attempt here.

Following this framework, we thus coded the contributions of each participant – whether presenter or guest speaker – in each episode for the *problems* they identified in relation to the war in Ukraine. An identifiable problem, as interpreted by the coder, induced a discrete frame. The coder did not code for a frame unless an explicit problem related to the war was mentioned (though identifying this required a degree of judgment on the



coder's part), which kept the frames relatively simple and broadly comparable. For each problem/frame, we then examined the same participant's immediate discourse (within 1-2 minutes of speech) for their interpretation of the *cause* of the problem – or the agent or actor that is to be “blamed” for it – as well as the recommended *treatment* (or remedy) – if any.

Coding was done by a single coder, on a basic scheme of problem-cause-treatment, which was piloted and then checked by the second researcher. Full reliability testing was not possible due to time and resource constraints, but the second researcher checked the identified frames for consistency. This was achieved by reviewing a subset of coded frames and discussing disagreements with the first researcher. We acknowledge our findings from the frame analysis can only be exploratory; however, they are still indicative enough to potentially challenge the idea that media only reproduce government positions.

The frames were then analyzed and classified according to cause/responsibility in three categories: Russian responsibility/“pro-Ukrainian,” Ukrainian or Western responsibility/“pro-Russian,” and shared or ambiguous responsibility/“neutral.” We also inductively developed a number of categories for the remedies to provide a more textured view of the media participants' framing of the problem beyond assigning responsibility alone. The table below provides some examples of frames that we identified and how these were classified.

Table 2: Examples of responsibility frame types from the data

Frame type	1. Problem (issue)	2. Cause (responsibility)	3. Remedy (solution)
1) Pro-Russian	Ukraine is discriminating against Russian people and language	“Military coup” in 2014 brought extremists to power in Ukraine	Russia must intervene to protect its citizens
2) Pro-Ukrainian	Ukrainian neutrality is insufficient for its security	Russia invaded Ukraine despite commitments to neutrality	Any agreement should include security guarantees by NATO
3) Neutral	War criminals may end up fighting in Ukraine	Both Russia and Ukraine are inviting mercenaries to fight in Ukraine	The crisis should be solved through negotiations

While frame analysis can be informative in an initial, broad sense, it should also be complemented by more detailed qualitative analysis to take account of what frames cannot capture (D'Angelo et al. 2019, 18-19). Specifically, we noticed during the coding process that significant stretches of discourse that involved positioning towards the war fell outside definable frames, primarily because they did not cue a frame through identifying a



single issue or problem. Moreover, the three descriptive elements of the frame that were coded for – problem, responsibility, and remedy – might not necessarily be the most interesting aspects of it; how a frame is arrived to and why it is mentioned, whether it is challenged, and the details of the language used to describe a frame could all be meaningful in developing the media participants' position towards official neutrality.

We therefore decided to combine frame analysis with discourse analysis, by selecting a few discourse-analytic cases. We proceed here from theories of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992), which explore the relationship between language, ideology, and power, and how language can be used to emphasize or de-emphasize specific linkages, agents, and ideas – focusing, in the present study, on language, rather than multi-modal analysis. We were guided by the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2009) and its concept of “recontextualization”: looking at aspects of the local media context, and particularly the impact of the war on Jordan, which was not always meaningfully captured by responsibility frames.

Thus, we identified four topics recurring in the data which exhibited tension around the positioning of neutrality. These topics can be considered “critical cases” (Flyvbjerg 2006, 226) for the management of neutrality by participants in media discourse. The topics included: (1) first-hand reports from Jordanians in Ukraine at the start of the war in 2022; (2) interventions where presenters challenged the factual accuracy of points made by (mostly pro-Russian) guest speakers; (3) the economic consequences of the war and the extent of their impact on Jordan; and (4) parallels between the Ukraine conflict and other wars, such as the 2003 U.S. and coalition attack on Iraq.

These four topics further gave us the opportunity to examine the impact of local media narratives where Jordan and Jordanians were directly invoked, as opposed to a more abstract context of discussing details of the war, proposed negotiations, or events in Europe, where the official government policy of neutrality was less likely to come into conflict or require mitigation. This approach allowed us to combine broad-based frame analysis with more detailed discourse analysis, providing an exploratory overview strengthened by detailed case studies of neutrality management, as we explore below.

Frame analysis: Assignment of responsibility

A central focus of representations on the war in Ukraine is the assignment of responsibility – both for the conflict itself, as well as for more specific issues that have emerged during it, such as global economic consequences or security issues. We first explore how responsibility was



assigned in the internationally oriented program *al-'Ashira* ("Ten o'clock"), broadcast on Al-Mamlaka, and move on to consider similar frames in *Sawt al-Mamlaka* ("Voice of the Kingdom"), broadcast on Al-Mamlaka, and *Nabd al-Balad* ("Heartbeat of the Country"), broadcast on Roya, which tend to focus more on domestic issues. In each section, we classify the frames identified into different categories of problem definition, causal interpretation (responsibility of specific actors in the conflict), and recommended treatment (remedy) to provide a quantifiable measure of different kinds of stances, including neutrality.

Al-'Ashira is a foreign affairs program broadcast on weekdays (Sunday to Thursday) at 10 PM on Al-Mamlaka TV. On *al-'Ashira*, a studio broadcaster and a few guests – sometimes in studio, but mostly via video link – discuss current international affairs. Guests typically include political and media analysts, academics, and journalists. While guests sometimes refer to points made by other guests, they generally do not interact with each other; similarly, the broadcaster tends not to interrupt the guests when speaking. While some guests are based in Jordan, most speak from abroad, and the language of the program is predominantly Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).

Of the 35 guest speakers in our *al-'Ashira* sample, the largest group (11, or 31.4%) came from Russia; five speakers (14.3%) were based in Ukraine, and 11 (31.4%) were based in Europe or the US. The rest came from Jordan or other Middle Eastern countries. The overall profile of the guests suggests at least some attempt at "balancing" coverage by providing guests with backgrounds from both war's sides, though perfect balance was evidently not accomplished. The guests based in Russia, including Russian media and political analysts who spoke in Arabic, and Arab researchers and analysts living in Russia, provided a more pro-Russian view of the conflict, discussing topics promoted by the Russian government and adopting pro-Russian frames. Guests based in Ukraine – mostly Arabic-speaking activists and analysts living in Ukraine, though one Ukrainian parliamentary advisor also spoke via an Arabic interpreter – were more pro-Ukrainian. Guests based elsewhere – mostly Arab media, conflict, or political analysts or researchers – adopted a more neutral stance that did not support the Russian invasion but was also sometimes critical of the actions of the Ukrainian leadership and its Western allies.

In terms of problem definition, *al-'Ashira* discussions revolved around the impact of the war on Ukraine, implications for Russian national security, and the impact of the war on Europe including the European energy sector, as well as U.S. interests and the impact of the war on the world, including



global food security. Some frames also identified Russia-Ukraine negotiations as an explicit problem. Table 3 provides an overview of the main categories of problems identified.

Table 3: *al-Ashira* frames by problem category

Main problem category defining frame	Instances	Percentage of total
Impact on Ukraine	28	30.1%
Impact on Russia	26	27.9%
Ukraine-Russia relations	6	6.5%
Impact on Europe	19	20.4%
US interests	6	6.5%
Impact on the world as a whole	8	8.6%
Total frames	93	100%

Second, each frame was coded according to a causal factor or assignment of responsibility. Some frames blamed either Ukraine or its Western allies for the occurrence of problems – for example, claims that Ukraine is discriminating against Russian people and language in Ukrainian territory (Al-Mamlaka 2022b), or that NATO expansion threatens Russian national security (Al-Mamlaka 2022f); these are categorized as *pro-Russian* frames. Conversely, other frames squarely blamed Russia for the occurrence of problems – such as claims that Russia invaded Ukraine despite previous commitments to Ukrainian neutrality (Al-Mamlaka 2022e) – which are categorized as *pro-Ukrainian* frames. Finally, there was also a considerable number of *neutral* frames, which imply shared responsibility or a more complex construction of causality; this includes, for example, claims that both Russia and Ukraine are inviting mercenaries to fight in Ukraine (Al-Mamlaka 2022c), or that the war in Ukraine is due to a broader geopolitical crisis between Russia and the West (Al-Mamlaka 2022f). The percentage of frames in each category of responsibility is seen in the table below.

Table 4: Frames in *al-Ashira* sample by causal factor (assignment of responsibility)

Main responsibility assignment	Instances	Percentage of total
Ukrainian or Western responsibility (“pro-Russian”)	37	39.8%
Russian responsibility (“pro-Ukrainian”)	28	30.1%
Shared or more complex responsibility (“neutral”)	28	30.1%
Total frames	93	100%

An issue was equally likely to be presented through a pro-Ukrainian (30.1%) or a neutral (30.1%) frame, while pro-Russian frames were slightly more frequent overall (39.8%). Notably, most frames invoked by guests were not challenged by hosts. This extended even to Russian-origin disinformation narratives (Hanley et al. 2022a) – including claims that Ukraine is hosting U.S. chemical weapons laboratories (Al-Mamlaka 2022d), that it is ruled by neo-Nazis (Al-Mamlaka 2022f), and that the Bucha massacre in March 2022 was staged (Al-Mamlaka 2022e). While this may be a consequence of *al-Ashira*’s particular format, it still suggests that hosts



were seeking not to actively support either side in the conflict; however, voices supporting either side were allowed to express themselves relatively freely, as opposed to being silenced in favor of an overall neutral agenda.

Finally, proposed remedies slightly favored a more neutral position, promoting diplomacy and negotiations. The prospect of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, as well as diplomatic efforts to end the conflict, featured more often than proposals to continue the war, as seen in Table 5 below. Indeed, the hosts of *al-'Ashira* regularly steered discussion towards this topic, asking guests about prospects of negotiations.

Table 5: Frames in *al-'Ashira* sample by type of remedy

Main proposed remedy	Instances	Percentage of total
International diplomacy	29	30.1%
Bilateral negotiations	18	19.4%
Continue war	26	27.9%
Change internal policies	9	9.7%
Change media messaging	3	3.2%
Other or no remedy	8	8.6%
Total frames	93	100%

By contrast with *al-'Ashira*, *Sawt al-Mamlaka* is broadcast on weekdays (Sunday to Thursday) at 8 PM, while *Nabd al-Balad* runs from Saturday to Wednesday, usually at 8 or 8:30 PM. Both programs feature studio guests, with occasional guests via phone call or video link. Both also focus on domestic Jordanian affairs, although *Nabd al-Balad* also occasionally discusses foreign affairs. In line with their predominantly domestic orientation, both broadcasters and guests in these programs tend to use Spoken Arabic with typical Jordanian features. In our sample, most guests on these programs – predominantly Jordanian media and political analysts, though also occasionally including locally prominent business and political figures – spoke in the studio, although some appeared by phone or video link, including a number of Jordanians based in Ukraine who were looking to leave the country in the initial phase of the conflict, and, on *Nabd al-Balad*, a handful of Arab commentators based in Russia.

Problem definitions in frames in *Sawt al-Mamlaka* and *Nabd al-Balad* could be divided into several categories. A prominent focus was the impact of the war on Jordan and Jordanian citizens – either through the economic effects of reduction of exports and sanctions on Russia, or the direct impact on Jordanian citizens who were present in Ukraine at the outset of the war. In the *Sawt al-Mamlaka* episode, the discussion emphasized the impact of the war on Jordanians – either those in Ukraine, or those suffering the potential economic effects (Al-Mamlaka 2022a). In *Nabd al-Balad*, by contrast, more international-oriented problem definitions resembling those in *al-'Ashira*



were also present, such as the impact of the war on the world economy (Roya 2022d) and Russian motivations for starting the war (Roya 2022a). Some frames also problematized the course of the war itself, without discussing its impact on any actor or area. The categories of problem definitions are quantified in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Frames in *Sawt al-Mamlaka* and *Nabd al-Balad* segments by problem category

Main problem category defining frame	Sawt al-Mamlaka instances	Sawt al-Mamlaka percentage	Nabd al-Balad instances	Nabd al-Balad percentage
Impact on Ukraine	3	33.3%	3	5.7%
Impact on Russia	-	-	18	34.0%
The course of the war itself	-	-	8	15.1%
Impact on Europe	-	-	1	1.9%
Impact on the world as a whole	-	-	13	24.5%
Impact on Jordan and Jordanian citizens	6	66.7%	10	18.9%
Total frames	9	100%	53	100%

In terms of assignment of responsibility, like *al-Ashira*, different frames again assigned responsibility to Ukraine/the West (“pro-Russian”), Russia (“pro-Ukrainian”), or neither (“neutral”). As seen in Table 7 below, neutral frames prevailed; *Nabd al-Balad* also featured a significant proportion of pro-Russian frames, with guest speakers based in Russia promoting pro-Russian talking points, and a lack of any equivalent Ukraine-based speakers that might provide “balance.”

Table 7: Frames in *Sawt al-Mamlaka* and *Nabd al-Balad* segments by frame type

Main responsibility assignment	Sawt al-Mamlaka instances	Sawt al-Mamlaka percentage	Nabd al-Balad instances	Nabd al-Balad percentage
Pro-Russian	-	-	15	28.3%
Pro-Ukrainian	-	-	2	3.8%
Neutral	9	100%	36	67.9%
Total frames	9	100%	53	100%

In terms of proposed remedies, as illustrated in Table 8 below, *Sawt al-Mamlaka* and *Nabd al-Balad* focused largely on internal state policies, such as price controls or economic reform, or the actions of the Jordanian government in repatriating Jordanian citizens in Ukraine (Al-Mamlaka 2022a). *Nabd al-Balad* also discussed changing media messaging as a remedy, for example to counter disinformation about the war (Roya 2022e), but also issues such as claims of war profiteering by Jordanian merchants (Roya 2022b). Frames that promoted the continuation of war as a remedy can, once again, be traced to Russia-based guest speakers who justified the invasion as necessary for Russian national security.

Table 8: Frames in *Sawt al-Mamlaka* and *Nabd al-Balad* segments by type of remedy



Main proposed remedy	Sawt al-Mamlaka instances	Sawt al-Mamlaka percentage	Nabd al-Balad instances	Nabd al-Balad percentage
International diplomacy	-	-	7	13.2%
Bilateral negotiations	-	-	4	7.5%
Continue war	-	-	12	22.6%
Change internal policies	8	88.9%	13	24.5%
Change media messaging	-	-	10	18.9%
Other or no remedy	1	11.1%	7	13.2%
Total frames	9	100%	53	100%

Compared to *al-Ashira*, the two programs analyzed in this section featured more interruptions of guests by the host, perhaps reflecting a more colloquial style of communication. However, there was little substantive debate of the issues, and the frames presented by speakers were not generally challenged. A number of possible stances towards the war was thus on offer, while hosts effectively avoided either contradicting or challenging official positions by refraining from overtly supporting either side's arguments.

In sum, frame analysis suggested a predominance of neutral frames in the domestic-oriented discussion programs, *Nabd al-Balad* and *Sawt al-Mamlaka*, while the international-oriented program, *al-Ashira*, presented both neutral and partisan (i.e. pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian) frames in equal measure. Suggested remedies, by contrast, steered more towards neutrality in the international-oriented program, but were more mixed in the domestic-oriented programs, which also focused a lot on potential changes to domestic Jordanian policy that could mitigate the impact of the war. Thus, while overall the agenda of neutrality was a prominent presence and sometimes promoted by hosts, it was not the only – or, in the case of *al-Ashira*, not even the most dominant – way of representing the conflict.

Discourse analysis: The discursive politics of agency, contestation, and scaling

Frame analysis, while informative, was mostly exploratory, and further revealed several themes that were not adequately captured by the schema of 'problem-cause-remedy' in our type of frame analysis, or a binary classification of either neutrality or support for either side in the conflict. For this reason, we embarked on discourse analysis of selected themes that potentially produced tension around the government policy of neutrality, to see how both hosts and guests in the discussion programs dealt with these themes. These themes included (1) conditions in Ukraine as described by Jordanian citizens; (2) presenter interventions when guests supported the Russian narrative; (3) the economic consequences of the war; and (4) the



drawing of parallels between the war in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East.

The first mechanism of stance management we identified was the manipulation of agency through nominalization. One aspect of the conflict that affected Jordan directly was the repatriation of Jordanian citizens located in Ukraine at the start of the Russian invasion. Both *Sawt al-Mamlaka* and *Nabd al-Balad* devoted considerable time to this issue – though it fell outside the scope of *al-'Ashira* and its focus on international politics – and interviewed Jordanian expatriates in Ukraine, as well as those who had already returned. While armed conflict, shelling, and airstrikes were mentioned as factors that made leaving the country difficult, nominalization – or the expression of actions using nouns, rather than verbs – was used to obfuscate agency and thus responsibility for the violence (Fairclough, 2003: 144; Van Dijk, 2008). Through using the Arabic verbal noun (*masdar*) and existential phrases with “there is” (هناك) – rather than, for example, active verbs in the present tense – speakers were able to refer to actions such as air strikes, shelling, and clashes as nouns without expressing individual verbal agents. And while, in Arabic, even nominalized actions can express agents through adjectival or prepositional structures – e.g. “the Russian campaign” (الحملة الروسية) – these were absent in reports from civilians on the ground.

This is clear in the following description of the situation by the head of the Jordanian community in Ukraine:

في مناطق فيها نزاع واشتباكات فيها وضع جدا صعب إنه تخرج من المناطق هاي، مثل خاركوف، مثل سومي، مثل كييف، لأنه حظر تجوال فيها موجود، والقصف فيها موجود واشتباكات فيها موجودة، فصعب الخروج منها.

Where there is fighting and clashes, it is very difficult to leave these regions – like Kharkiv, Sumy, Kyiv – because there is a curfew there, and there is shelling, and there are clashes, so it is difficult to leave. (Roya 2022a, at 4:15-4:35)

The conflict was thus described by Jordanians in Ukraine less as a conflict with distinct warring sides than a catastrophe that had to be fled. While ordinary citizens may not have a direct stake in representing official government positions, their mitigation of agency through nominalization still echoed a neutral stance – though perhaps this is not surprising for civilians attempting to flee a war zone. Still, the discourse analysis shows their stance – their positioning towards the war – was carefully managed through their linguistic choices, without necessarily mobilizing broader responsibility frames.



Second, stance was also managed on a more interactional level through contestation. As mentioned in the frame analysis above, while some foreign affairs and military specialists followed the neutrality line, many other guest speakers who put the blame for the conflict squarely on either Russia, on the one hand, or Ukraine and NATO, on the other hand – resulting in the pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian responsibility assignment described above, respectively. The presenters rarely attempted to reframe these assignments; some of the most infamous pro-Russian narratives, such as claims that the Bucha massacre was staged, thus went unchallenged (Al-Mamlaka 2022e). But in few instances, pro-Russian speakers were challenged by hosts. One example is provided in the September 28, 2022 episode of *al-Ashira*, when the presenter interrupted a guest's discussion of the legality of referendums run in Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine:

أنا أقول لك وجهة نظر. كافة الدول اعتبرت هذا الاستفتاء مهزلة ومضحكة
وانتهاك صارخ لقرارات الأمم وميثاق الأمم المتحدة.

I am giving you a viewpoint. All countries considered this referendum a farce, and a contravention of UN decisions and the UN charter. (Al-Mamlaka 2022g, at 21:39-21:52)

After a heated exchange of words, the pro-Russian guest speaker was eventually cut off. The presenter then blamed Russia as responsible for “worsening” the situation through these referendums, assigning Russia agency for this problematic issue (Al-Mamlaka 2022g). When pro-Russian speakers insisted on repeating particularly egregious claims, it seems that a “passive bystander” stance no longer cut it: instead, presenters engaged in explicit contestation to realign the overall discourse to avoid straying too deeply into pro-Russian territory. Such contestation created a clearer alignment of the presenter's stance towards neutrality, but only at the extremes of pro-Russian discourse.

Similar efforts were made by the host of *Nabd al-Balad* in the March 1, 2022 episode. In response to claims by a pro-Russian guest speaker that Russia was being unfairly accused by Western media of having planned to invade Ukraine months before the invasion, the presenter offered the following narrative:

خلينا نتفق في الأصل أن الحملة الروسية بدأت لحماية مناطق أعلنتها روسيا
مناطق مستقلة وثم تطور الأمر وأن الغرب حذر من اجتياح لأوكرانيا وأن روسيا
نفذت ذلك ثم دخلت أوكرانيا. وهي أسئلة يطرحها العالم أجمعه.



Let's agree that the Russian campaign initially began to protect the regions Russia had declared independent, then things developed, and the West warned about an invasion of Ukraine, and Russia entered Ukraine. These are questions that the entire world is asking. (Roya 2022c, at 10:06-10:25)

An attempt to establish common ground with the guest speaker – “let's agree” – is followed by a narration of events in which Russia holds primary agency: the “Russian campaign,” the regions (Donetsk and Luhansk) which “Russia declared” to be independent, and “Russia” was the one who entered Ukraine. Ukraine – like its “regions” declared to be independent states by Russia – is the object, with no agency. While “the West” remains the subject of one clause, it “warned” as a result of Russian actions; similarly, the “entire world” – including, presumably, neutral countries such as Jordan – is a subject in one clause, but only inasmuch as it is “asking” “questions” as a result of Russian actions. These actions are not discussed very explicitly: Russia is not described as the subject of aggression or invasion, and the phrase “things developed” (تطورت الأمور) mitigates the tone from being too accusatory. Still, the overall function of this intervention is to contest the previous narrative of Western agency in accusing Russia, replacing it with one of Russian agency and ultimate responsibility. In this example, as above, hosts walked a discursive tightrope between the role of disinterested bystander and that of active moderator in a debate that would not over-promote certain biased narratives, once again clarifying their alignment (stance) towards the conflict only at the extremes.

A final process involved in the management of stances towards the war was discursive manipulation of space. In the February 27, 2022 episode of *Sanat al-Mamlaka*, the presenter introduced the discussion as follows:

حربٌ تجري حالياً بين روسيا وأوكرانيا، تبعد عنا هذه الدول آلاف الكيلومترات
من حيث المسافة، ولكن يخشى بعض مشاهديننا من تداعيات هذه الحرب
اقتصادية علينا، خصوصاً إذا ما استمرت أو حتى توسّعت.

There is a war now between Russia and Ukraine. These countries are thousands of kilometers away from us. But some of our viewers fear the economic ramifications of this war – especially if it continues, or even spreads. (Al-Mamlaka 2022a, at 0:35-0:58)

Representing the spatial circumstances (Fairclough 2003, 151-54) of the Ukraine war in terms of *physical distance* both justifies Jordan's neutrality



in the conflict, and ratifies its discussion due to its potential economic consequences, implying increased detachment (Evans 2010). As can be seen below, however, spatialization is not just managed through distance; other kinds of spatialization were also mobilized to refine participants' stances toward aspects of the conflict. Distancing can thus better be seen as one among several types of *scaling*, or discursive manipulations of space, which position participants as more or less affected by the war.

Another prominent theme was the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine, specifically, the potential for rising food prices in Jordan. The economic situation and price rise in Jordan are frequent topics of domestic discussion and debate on government policy. The economy was discussed both in the *Sawt al-Mamlaka* episode and in several episodes of *Nabd al-Balad*, particularly since Jordan imported several important foodstuffs from both Russia and Ukraine, in particular certain grains, such as barley, and sunflower oil; rising prices were a persistent source of worry. In one episode of *Nabd al-Balad*, a local business leader argued that, rather than concerning themselves too much with the Ukraine war itself, Jordanians – and their government – should instead manage economic issues on a domestic level:

اليوم احنا والعالم كله مقبل على أزمة إن طال أمد الحرب. يمكن تنتهي بأي لحظة،
تعرف هاي سياسة ومصالح. اليوم المطلوب من الحكومة... خلية إدارة أزمة.

Today, we and the whole world need to be ready for a crisis – if the war goes on. It might end at any time, it's [up to] politics and [state] interests. At present, the government has to [form] a crisis management committee. (Roya 2022b, at 4:15-4:31)

There is a sense of distancing here; Jordan is, presumably, not a participant in the politicking that may or may not end the war in Ukraine. But in the very next sentence, the speaker changes the spatial reference to greater *proximity*: price rises are reframed as a primarily *domestic* economic challenge that needs to be tackled by the Jordanian government. Thus, while the war and its political causes and remedies take place elsewhere, and distancing might make neutrality more plausible, the domestic dimension must also be considered, requiring the speaker to scale strategically between distance and proximity to re-evaluate the consequences of the conflict and thus refine their stance.

The programs also dealt with the economic impact of Western sanctions on Russia, including the price of oil and gas, and the exclusion of Russian banks from the Swift banking system and international bank



transfers, as outlined by the head of the Amman Chamber of Commerce in one episode of *Nabd al-Balad*:

روسيا بديل أوكرانيا لكن العقوبات اليوم على روسيا... اليوم فيه عقوبات عالبنوك. هل نقدر نلاقي آلية مع الروس؟ لأنه انخفاض العملة الروسية يساعد في انخفاض الكلف. لكن هل نستطيع الاستيراد اليوم في ظل العقوبات؟ هل سيتم استثناء القطاع الخاص من العقوبات؟

Russia is an alternative to Ukraine, but there are sanctions imposed on Russia ... There are now sanctions on banks. Will we be able to find a mechanism with the Russians? The decline in Russian currency means lower costs. But are we able to import, in light of the sanctions? Will the private sector be exempt from sanctions? (Roya 2022b, at 4:38-4:58)

Here, Russia is presented as an “alternative” (بديل) to war-ravaged Ukraine as a source of agricultural and other products. Sanctions are both a challenge and an opportunity; they are not considered morally, or in terms of their causes or effects – their imposition on Russia as the aggressor and their aim of compelling it to end the war – but as a feature of the overall economic landscape. In another complex feat of discursive scaling, Jordan is simultaneously distanced from the broader political debates on the war – while the economic challenges are isolated and domesticated, calling for a proximate response to the economic problems alone. Thus, the stance on the conflict exhibits more re-alignment, moving between presumed neutrality (at a distance) versus more commitment and worry towards its effects (in Jordanian proximity).

Finally, Ukraine’s distance from Jordan did not prevent hosts and presenters from making parallels between the war in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East – specifically, the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Israel’s occupation of Palestine. These have been a major topic in discussions in Jordanian (and Arab) media for the past two decades, imposing a particular discursive media history which colors any local discussions of global conflicts. References to these conflicts were thus *recontextualized* (Reisigl and Wodak 2009) in different ways by participants, including pro-Russian guest speakers who sought to defend Russian actions in Ukraine through highlighting perceived Western hypocrisy. But the comparison resonated with the Jordanian presenters as well. On *al-Ashira* on April 5, 2022, the presenter countered a guest’s description of the U.S. support for Ukraine as defending the fundamental principles of the rule of law:



استوقفني عندما ذكرت الحفاظ على سيادة القانون، عندما قامت الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية بغزو العراق بناء على أدلة أن الرئيس السابق صدام حسين كان يملك أسلحة التدمير الشامل و فرق التفيتش الدولي لم تعثر على أي من هذه الأسلحة، وقد استطاعت إسقاط نظامه بحجة أنه يشكل تهديدا على الأمن القومي الأمريكي.

It struck me when you mentioned the rule of law. When the U.S. invaded Iraq based on [purported] evidence that former president Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, and international inspection teams found no such weapons, they still managed to topple his regime under the pretext that it threaten[ed] U.S. national security. (Al-Mamlaka 2022e, at 24:16-24:42)

This is clearly a critique of perceived American hypocrisy, invading Iraq on a flimsy pretext and then, two decades later, criticizing Russia for doing much the same in Ukraine. This response, which could not be captured by a responsibility frame, nevertheless construes a complex stance towards the conflict on the presenter's part. Discourse-historical references are used to re-evaluate U.S. or Western interpretations and refine the stance beyond simple detached 'neutrality' to comment on the general impact of conflicts run by major powers.

On *Nabd al-Balad*, the issue emerged most prominently in the March 2, 2022 episode that analyzed media coverage of the Ukraine war, where the host, Muhammad al-Khalidi, drew attention to the perceived double standards of Western media when reporting on the Ukraine war versus conflicts in the Middle East – including Palestine, an especially resonant topic in Jordan, with its large population of Palestinian origin:

بمقارنة التغطيات الإعلامية لما حدث في العراق، في أفغانستان، في اليمن، في سوريا، في فلسطين، ما يحدث يوميا في فلسطين، بمقارنة ما يحدث بين أوكرانيا وروسيا، نشهد فرقا شاسعا. يعني هاي ازدواجية مطلقة. ليش؟!

Comparing the media coverage of events in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Palestine – what happens on a daily basis in Palestine – compared to what is happening between Ukraine and Russia, we see a huge difference. Total divergence. Why?! (Roya 2022e, at 14:55-15:17)

These recontextualizations raised questions about perceived shifts in media and political language in the West—positioning them at a distance from both the Western (or pro-Ukrainian) and Russian stances on the



conflict, yet also making their position more complex than simple, uninvolved neutrality. Representing one's stance on the war was thus not merely a measure of distance, but more multidimensional *scaling*, or representations of space along a number of axes: physical distancing, which does detach the war from the immediate Jordanian context; but also proximity, when describing the economic problems caused by the Ukraine war as best tackled through domestic Jordanian responses, and regionalization, when making parallels between Ukraine and wars in the Middle East.

Scaling has therefore merged with linguistic strategies, such as nominalization, and interactional strategies, such as contestation, to refine media participants' stances towards the conflict in nuanced ways, beyond simply reproducing official government neutrality. Stance is a particularly relevant theoretical concept here, as the processes involve three major elements of stance-taking: evaluation, positioning, and alignment towards the conflict. Nominalization functions as a way to develop a specific stance towards the war, positioning the speaker as a neutral observer or bystander rather than a participant with a stake in that war. Contesting agency mainly revealed the presenters' alignment towards the conflict—ostensibly neutral, but only at the extremes of discourse, when discussion became too partisan (where it also evaluated some, and in particular pro-Russian, guests' contributions as 'too extreme'). Finally, scaling is obviously a form of positioning – as in attempts to distance Jordan from the war in Ukraine – but also evaluation, when presenters drew on media-historical comparisons with past wars in the Middle East to provide a unique evaluation of the conflict.

Conclusion

While official Jordanian policy towards the Ukraine war may be neutral, participants in media show more complex attitudes that nevertheless call for discursive representation, on multiple axes that go beyond simple binaries of pro/against or close/far. In the specific discussion programs that we analyzed, responsibility frames indicated some neutrality, although it was by no means predominant. Further complexity was indicated by stance-taking towards the conflict, expressed through contestations of agency and space, language, interaction, and scaling. Local media narratives inevitably shape such responses: the welfare of Jordanians abroad, the country's economic woes, and the persistent impact of foreign involvement on wars within the Middle East – Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, and, though it falls beyond the scope of this study, more recently also Iran – all play a role in developing media participants' positions.



While frame analysis suggests some complexity, it is limited to considering discrete problem-responsibility pairs, and much discourse falls outside its scope. The full details can only be revealed through close attention to discursive issues: linguistic forms, such as nominalization; interactional concerns, such as contestation of agency; and media-historical dynamics, as evident in the use of scaling to distance, domesticate, and even regionalize the crisis at different points. Moreover, it is not just the description of the war or its causes that is relevant here, but also stance-taking, including evaluation, positioning, and aligning media participants towards the conflict. What might count as ‘neutrality’ in the Jordanian media context is thus not easily captured by oft-repeated truisms about Anglo-American journalistic practices of detachment and ‘balancing.’ To navigate the difficult terrain of global conflicts, there should be no sharp discursive turns; but that is not to say there should be no turns at all.

The case of Jordan is unique and specific, and this article has not attempted and cannot provide a fully generalizable or comparative analysis. However, it can still contribute to broader debates on media representations of conflict beyond Jordan. The complexity of the development of positions on the war in Ukraine in Jordanian discussion programs suggests more attention should be paid to multi-dimensional discursive processes, such as agency mitigation and scaling, and the need to look beyond simple binaries that replicate well-accustomed geopolitical biases. Neutrality should, as a start, be acknowledged as a possible response in media representations of conflicts, but it should also be examined with nuance and attention to context, to mitigate biases and generalizations ultimately stemming from media studies’ preference for Western media contexts and limited understandings of the local dynamics of Arab media.

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