

Political Cartoons in the Middle East: A New Form of Communication and Resistance

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The aim of this research is to analyze and study political cartoon in the Middle East. In general, political cartoons have been considered a form of fun and they have been ignored. However, owing to de fact that they have seen as just fun, they provide comments on society that are relevant to the public sphere. As a result, the objectives of this research are to discuss this function of cartoons in the Middle East, to study how they work as a form of communication in Middle Eastern societies, to analyze cartoons as form to fight against the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and to assess the evolution of political cartoons in the Middle East. Additionally, in order to develop and analyze these objectives, a qualitative methodology has been used. This research is a theoretical approach as a wide variety of data have been collected and analyzed. Therefore, this research is a form of understanding how political cartoons are product of every culture as they are a non-verbal language capable to encourage people to fight against the authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: cartoons, Middle East, Cultural Revolution, cultural identity, mass media, symbolical languages

Introduction

This research is an attempt to analyze political cartoons in the Middle East and the ways in which they function as forms of social political communication and public sphere reaction. It is an area that has not been studied before in a scholarly manner owing to the fact that cartoons are generally meant to be comical and funny. However, precisely because they are considered as “just fun”, they can communicate many relevant issues to the public sphere. In other words, political cartoons offer an important point of view that can result in political changes and influence society strongly as they are able to encourage people to fight against the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

As a result, different hypotheses have been considered in this research. These hypotheses are: (1) Political cartoons are a new form of communication because they are included in newspapers as an opinion that is quite easy to understand; (2) cartoons in the Middle East act as language that joins the society since they have common symbols and interests; (3) they are a peaceful weapon to fight authoritarian regimes as they are able to influence people as a visual language; and (4) political cartoons are a reflection of society on the grounds that they are transformed by the different events in the Middle East.

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According to these hypotheses, several objectives have been established in order to study these hypotheses. These objectives are: (1) to discuss the function of political cartoons in the Middle East; (2) to study cartoons as a new form of communication; (3) to analyze art as a tool to fight the repression of regimes; and (4) to assess the evolution of political cartoons in these area.

Additionally, a qualitative methodology has been used to test these hypotheses and develop these objectives on the grounds that it is a theoretical approach. Therefore, theoretical material dealing with political cartoons in the Middle East has been used. Moreover, a visual ethnography has been drawn on in order to collect a wide variety of data about media and political cartoons in the Middle East to develop a grounded theory in relation to this topic. Several cartoons of Ali Ferzat¹ have been observed in order to describe what it is happening in these cartoons and several books have been studied so as to confirm political cartoons are a form of communication and an art of resistance.

In summary, the aim of this research is to show the emergence of a specific kind of political cartoon that has become a reference for the Middle East. Political cartoons in the Middle East are a product of the culture that reveals the needs of a society. For this reason, they are an important form of communication because they are capable of circumventing censorship by using symbols and act as an artistic resistance.

Political Cartoons in the Middle East

In general, political cartoons in the Middle East were born in the 19th century. The first cartoon took place in Egypt in 1880 in a satirical journal and its birth was associated to the development of the press in the *Nahda* (*Awakening*) period. The main function of these cartoons was to entertain the society as they make people laugh at the different events that cartoonists represented in these models (El-Jisr, 1988, n.p.). Nevertheless, the roots of these cartoons were European and portrayed growing western influence in the region owing to the fact that they represented a blend of a European artistic style with Middle Eastern culture, traditions, and icons, creating a new approach to the cartoon genre (Wichhart, 2009, pp. 8.1-8.21). It was a process in which cartoonists took Western models, transformed and mixed them developing their own (Abu-Loghod, 1989, p, 7). Consequently, these cartoons were marked by an intense cultural schizophrenia because cartoonists suffered a conflict of identity in the society. Thus, this period was known as *realism* as cartoonists interpreted their own world not by personal experiences, but rather by reading European journals and magazines (Müge Göçek, 1998, pp. 81-92).

In contrast, political cartoons evolved in the Middle East in the second half of the 20th century. Satirical journals were multiplied and diversified to such an extent that appeared a new group of cartoonists. These cartoonists were known as *modernists* and they were in charge of redefining the artistic rules of political cartoons in the Middle East. Therefore, they began to address issues such as social injustice or class struggle in order to generate a politicization of the cartoons that led to assume the duty of enlightening and educating the society (Müge Göçek, 1998, pp. 104-110).

However, political cartoons crystallized in the Middle East in the 1990s. New technologies were developed but cartoonists realized that the news that was broadcast on television were not clear. For this reason,

¹ Ali Ferzat's cartoons have been analyzed and studied for this research because he is one of the most important cartoonists in the Middle East. He has drawn more than 15,000 cartoons and has been awarded a lot of times. In addition to this, he can be considered an activist because he faced the Syrian regime using cartoons as weapon.

they used cartoons to satirize media and tell real news about the different conflicts in the Middle East (Slymovics, 2001, p. 97). In other words, cartoonists considered that the media did not transmit the reality of the facts, so cartoons became a form of communication and propaganda in the Middle East (Müge Göçek, 1998, pp. 139-144).

Nevertheless, the most important moment for political cartoons in the Middle East was the development of the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a social revolt but it was considered an artistic reaction, too. Art contributed to creative activism and generated an immediate response as it was able to simplify complex ideas in visual products. Thus, cartoons became an important tool that was able to subvert the repression practiced by the authoritarian of regimes (Jamshidi, 2014, pp. 77-101).

Political Cartoons as Form of Communication: Symbols and Themes

Political cartoons in the Middle East are considered a form of communication on the grounds that they are opinions that provide comments on society. In fact, they are easier to understand because images are more direct than words. Therefore, they are visual language that includes common symbols and themes that are recognized easily by the society and avoid the censorship of the governments.

The main symbols that have been analyzed in this research are: the Star of David and Blue Color, the personification of the Globe and women and children. Despite cartoonists may use more symbols, these three symbols are common in all the cartoonists in the Middle East. Thus, they have been analyzed exhaustively in this research (Qassim, n.d.). In addition to this, Ali Ferzat's cartoons have been used as reference owing to the fact he has lived through the evolution of political cartoons in the Middle East².

The Star of David and Blue Color: These symbols are complementary and get together in cartoons in the Middle East. Middle Eastern cartoonists use them to criticize Israel as the conflict between Israel and Palestine is quite discussed in the Middle East. In general, cartoonists sympathize with the oppression of Palestine by Israel and the cartoons are considered a relief for Palestinian (Qassim, n.d., pp. 44-47).

² Ali Ferzat was born in Hama (Syria) in 1952. He published his first cartoon at 12 in an Algerian newspaper. Additionally, he has published his cartoons in both European and Arab newspapers and he has been awarded because of his wonderful work. In contrast, he has been censored by the government several times, so he has used a wide variety of symbols to avoid the censorship. An example is the Syrian journal *al-Domari (the Lamplighter)* which was censored in 2003 by the government (Farzat, 2012).

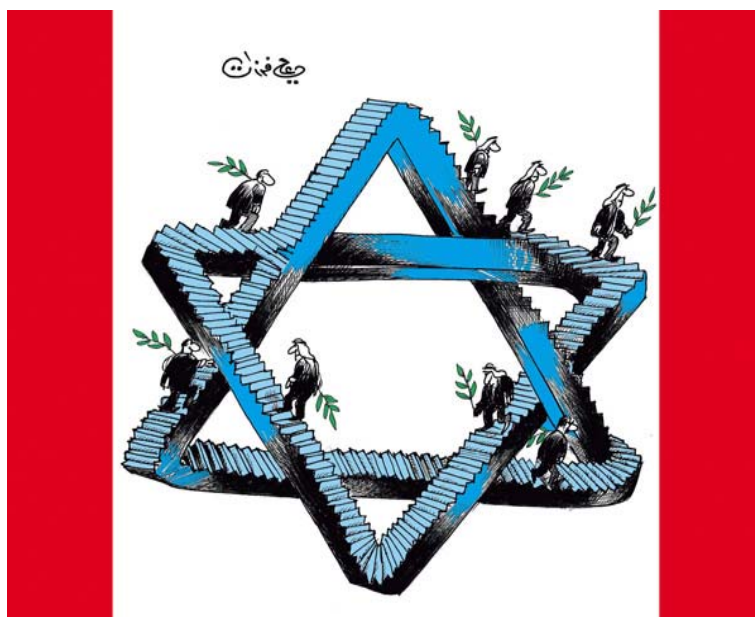


Figure 1. Lost Palestinians³ (Ferzat, n.d.).

The Personification of the Globe: The Globe is represented as a human being whose head is a Globe. This man is a man that wears a suit and he is astonished because of the disasters in the Middle East. Additionally, it is a symbol that treats a hopeless feeling that shows how people are immersed in a large number of conflicts without a clear solution (Qassim, n.d., pp. 47-49).



Figure 2. The Personification of the Globe⁴ (Ferzat, n.d.).

³ Several men are walking around the Blue Star of David. They are asking for peace but they are not able to find the end. Thus, the meaning of this cartoon is the lack of peace in the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

⁴ A man whose head is the Globe is looking the news about Syria. He is astonished because he realized the conflict after taking off his sunglasses whose name is Russia and Iran. The meaning of this cartoon is a critic about the reaction of Syrian civil war.

Women and Children: Women and children are used to represent the victims of society. Women are victims of a double morality in society as they are represented as a sexual desire of men (Qassim, n.d., pp. 50-55). However, children are considered victims of the war owing to the fact they will become adults some day (Qassim, n.d., p. 52).

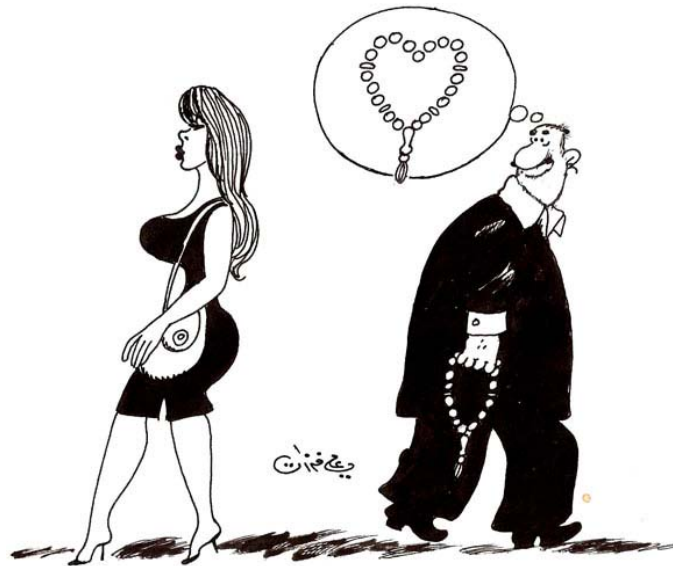


Figure 3. Women and the Double Morality⁵ (Ferzat, n.d.).



Figure 4. Children of the War⁶ (Ferzat, n.d.).

⁵ There are a woman and a man in this picture. The woman wears a dress and is walking. However, the man is going to pray but his thought is focus on this woman. Therefore, this cartoon is a critic about role of women in society as they are considered a sexual mechanism to satisfy men.

⁶ There is a child crying in this cartoon and behind the child there is a plane that is destroying a place. Moreover, the child's shadow is a weapon that symbolizes his feature. Thus, the meaning of this cartoon is to criticize the wars and to emphasize that children are the real victims because they will become adults in the future.

On the other hand, the main themes of political cartoons in the Middle have been studied. The themes are the same in the Middle East on the grounds that cartoonists are focused on common interests. Thus, three themes have been underlined in this research: political cartoons, social cartoons, and global cartoons.

Political cartoons: Cartoonists use these cartoons to criticize the lack of peace and democracy and the corruption of the governments. This theme can be divided in three important topics: domestic, Arab, and international politics. Firstly, domestic politics refers to the politics of every country that is a form of propaganda to continue in the government. Secondly, Arab politics tries to explain the lack of unity in Arab politics. Finally, international politics is used to analyze the international position and the lack of support to solve the problems (Aziz Ali, 2010).



Figure 5. The Discourse of the President⁷ (Ferzat, n.d.).

Social cartoons: These cartoons are used to criticize bad aspects in society. Cartoonists analyze problems such as poverty and hungry as well as bureaucratic and administrative problems (Aziz Ali, 2010).

⁷ A president is speaking to the audience and there is a man that encourages people to clap the hands in order to support the president. The meaning of these cartoons is to analyze the lack of freedom in order to decide about political issues.

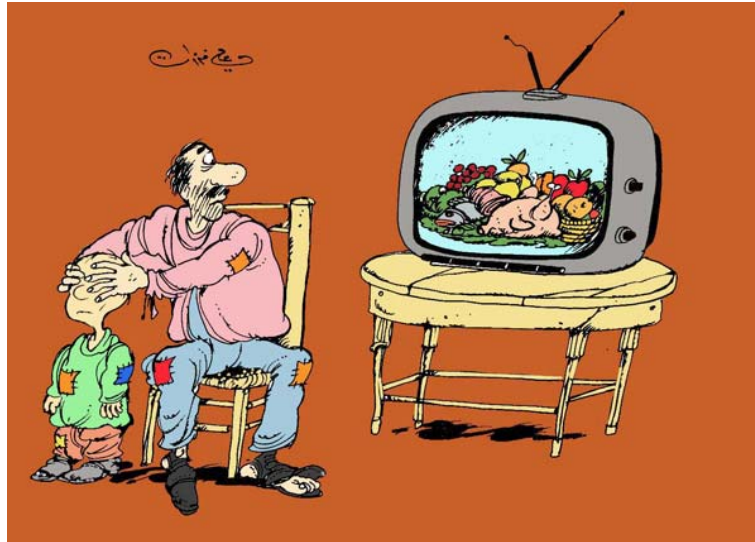


Figure 6. The Poverty⁸ (Ferzat, n.d.).

Global cartoons: This kind of cartoon is a mixture of both political and social cartoons. Cartoonists use politics to criticize social problem and they use social problems to criticize politics. Moreover, these cartoons are the most common because they are the real reflection of the problems in the Middle East (Aziz Ali, 2010).



Figure 7. A Cooked Citizen⁹ (Ferzat, n.d.).

⁸ A man is covering the eyes of his son in order not to watch television. In contrast, this man is watching a big banquet on television. Therefore, the cartoonist criticizes the poverty and hungry owing to the fact people prefer to have television and other devices instead of food.

⁹ There is an officer that is cooking a man and this man is sad and he is asking for food. Thus, the meaning of this cartoon is to reflect how the government oppresses the citizens.

Political Cartoons as Form of Art of Resistant: The Evolution of Political Cartoons in the Middle East

After analyzing and studying the morphology and the content of political cartoons in the Middle East, an important evolution has been observed. Political cartoons can be divided in two important periods and these periods are associated to the Arab Spring. That is, the first period takes place before the Arab Spring and the second period takes after the Arab Spring.

Before the Arab Spring, political cartoons in the Middle East were universal because they could refer to all the countries in the Middle East. In other words, these cartoons were enforced in every country with the same meaning. In addition to this, the critics were indirect and presidents cannot be recognized. In fact, cartoonists usually used officers or members of the army to refer to the government. Therefore, these cartoons were able to avoid censorship on the grounds that cartoonists used symbols and double senses in order to express ideas and attitudes that the society held. For this reason, this first period was considered an alternative media owing to the fact they were an alternative form of free information (Flores, 2017b, pp. 119-141).

On the other hand, political cartoons were consolidated after the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was a social revolt and an artistic revolution. Thus, the art was redefined and political cartoons were understood in a different way in the Middle East. They were a consolidated form of communication but they were not universal after the Arab Spring. Now, presidents are recognized easily and cartoonists criticize the government directly. As consequence, cartoonists focused on specific countries and cartoons became a sign of revolution. They were used in different demonstrations as a signal of protest and were very powerful because they had been able to influence people as a visual language that was easier to understand (Flores, 2017b, pp. 119-141). Additionally, cyberspace and social media were very important for their transmissions as they contributed to fast transmission of these cartoons. They were an important format with which to transmit this revolution by breaking the barriers of fear (Liu, 2013, p. 2).

Nevertheless, the reaction of the governments was extremely negative. Many cartoonists were pursued because of their cartoons. For instance, Ali Ferzat was attacked by Syrian government as he represented the Syrian president directly. He drew Bashar al-Asad and Muammar al-Gaddafi leaving their countries together. As a result, the Syrian government kidnapped the cartoonists and broke his finger. However, he recovered from that episode and he continued drawing against the president (Farzat, 2012, n.p.). Consequently, he received a lot of awards because he had broken the frontiers of fears as he had opened many doors for young cartoonists. Thus, political cartoons had become a consolidated of aggressive humor.



Figure 8. Bashar al-Asad and Muammar al-Gadafi Leaving Their Countries Together (Ferzat, n.d.).

Conclusions

To complete this research, several conclusions have been established. All this conclusions are connected and it is very important to understand them together.

First of all, political cartoons are product of every culture. Political cartoons have experienced an evolution in the Middle East and they cannot be considered a static source. For this reason, they should be considered a reflection of society that explains different realities in specific moments.

In addition to this, political cartoons must be understood as a form of pan-Arabism. Cartoons represent experiences of common citizens as the imagination of identity in the Middle East. In other words, they represent the necessities of the communities that are not hold by governments.

As a result, they are a form of communication. Cartoonists have created a landscape where people are able to use laughter as a good coping mechanism during political upheaval. Political cartoons give rise to multiple interpretations as they are opened to self-interpretation. In general, political cartoons have been able to generate an alternative vision to the narrative thanks to the symbolism used. Furthermore, they have been able to break the frontiers of language and illiteracy. There are many dialects in the Middle East and the rates of illiteracy are very high, so the communication could be difficult. Thus, cartoons are an important tool to facilitate the communication as they should be considered a non-verbal language based on images that made his language in their own.

For this reason, this art has consolidated as a new form of resistance. Cartoonists generated a creative activism that encourages people to participate in the creative-political process and at the same time they developed a joyful resistance that was both disconcerting and dangerous to the government. Consequently, these cartoons promoted ideas based on choice and reminded readers of the revolution's non-violent roots. Therefore, the genre of political cartoons has become a dangerous medium of artistic expression to those to wish the stifle dissent.

To sum up, the genre of political cartoons has been consolidated in the Middle East and has opened many doors to young artists. Additionally, this genre will keep evolving in the future to encourage people to build a better world in which no one must suffer oppression by corrupt leaders. This fact is due to visual culture which is more shocking than other media since it has power to unite people and generate a strong sense of identity that could ultimately provoke change.

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