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Migration Narrative(s) in the Arab Media
A Metaphorical Framing Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, migration across the Mediterranean has progressively gained attention in the European political forum and in news media, where metaphorical language has constantly marked the narrative strategies used to frame migrants as a threat to social security in host countries. As an integral part of this scenario, news production in the Arab world has always provided a detailed coverage of migration-related issues, although strongly influenced by the translation process of the foreign material it relies on. Through the lens of metaphorical framing analysis, this paper seeks to understand whether the Arab media discourse challenges the European dominant narrative on migration, or if it rather contributes to its reproduction.

KEYWORDS: Arab media; migration; conceptual metaphor; framing; critical discourse analysis.

> A compelling narrative fosters an illusion of inevitability
> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011, 168)

1. Introduzione

1.1 Historical background

In recent years, what is usually referred to as illegal or irregular migration has grown to the point that it has become a priority on the European Union's political agenda. Despite the restrictive policies adopted since the mid 1980s to control external borders, the arrival of so-called economic migrants – that is, people seeking an improved standard of living – has witnessed an increasing trend

(Castles *et al.* 2014), mainly driven by high unemployment rates in origin countries, and encouraged by the socio-economic stability and geographical nearness of the old continent.

Over the last decade, however, migration across the Mediterranean has escalated dramatically: the uprisings that erupted throughout the Arab world in 2010-11, and which offered promising signs of social change and peaceful democratization, eventually spiralled into armed conflicts, resulting in a major humanitarian crisis (Boulby and Christie 2018).

In 2015, the Syrian crisis escalated into a violent sectarian struggle, generating an exodus of over 4 million citizens, who were forced to flee their homes and take desperate measures for survival. While most displaced people were relocated in neighbouring countries, many families embarked on hazardous journeys, heading for the Northern shores of the Mediterranean. According to IOM, by the end of December 2015, 3,771 people had lost their lives trying to cross the sea, and over one million migrants/refugees had arrived in Europe (iom.int). Due to an unprecedented number of first-time asylum requests, the refugee crisis took centre stage in the European political debate, fuelling, in many cases, right-wing populism and xenophobia.

Migration has also been a major concern for most states in the MENA region, where local authorities are bound by cooperation agreements with the European Union, requesting them to keep human mobility under control. However, owing to inadequate human and material resources, they often fail to prevent human trafficking rings from exploiting irregular migration towards Europe. All Arab African countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea are not only departure hubs, but they are also transit or even destination countries for Sub-Saharan migrants. Morocco, in particular, which has an estimated diaspora of 5 million citizens over the world, is for many sub-Saharan Africans either the journey's end or simply a transit area on their way to the Spanish shores.

Some of these countries host large refugee populations. A special case is represented by Lebanon which became, in a relatively short period of time, the Arab country with the highest number of refugees per capita (1 refugee every 5 nationals[1]). When the Syrian crisis began, Lebanon kept its borders with Syria open, allowing crowds of Syrian citizens to chaotically enter its territory

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[1] Lebanon was already hosting 208,000 Palestinian refugees and 78,000 migrants from other nationalities, before over 1,5 million Syrian officially registered refugees entered the country, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east/lebanon_en (23/04/2023).

(Kikano *et al.* 2021). Such an apparently lenient attitude was rather the result of institutional inertia. In 2014 the Lebanese government closed border crossing points and introduced a new set of rules, which restricted legal residency to real estate owners and to those who could successfully regularise their status through a Lebanese sponsor (Saghieh 2015). Not only did these measures strongly discourage other Syrians from seeking protection in Lebanon, but they implicitly conferred an illegal status upon anyone who had already entered the country but was unable to meet these requirements. Besides, in order to escape all obligations associated with the internationally acknowledged status of *refugee*, Lebanese authorities have always avoided using this label with Syrians, and rather categorised them as *guests*, *displaced* or more cynically as *de facto refugees*. In May 2015, and in line with the new rules, the government directed the UNHCR to stop registering Syrians as refugees, claiming that they would not be considered as such under the new residency policy. Lebanon has also found a way to circumvent the legal obstacle of the *non-refoulement* principle of international law, by issuing deportation orders and informing refugees that they must leave the country (Janmyr M. 2016). Furthermore, unlike Jordan and Turkey, Lebanon prohibited the establishment of official refugee camps, for national security reasons. Municipalities were tacitly appointed to the task of administering the informal settlements that were established, and that of dealing with humanitarian agencies, leaving much of the initiative to local mayors and political leaders.

On the whole, much of the action taken to address the crisis has shrunken the space of legality and produced marginalisation and precariousness with the ultimate goal of pushing refugees to leave.

1.2 Research question

Migration-related issues have constantly captured the attention of academics and media outlets alike. The predominant narrative strategies used by European news discourse, framed migration as a threat to social security through a misleading representation of the phenomenon, expressed or implied by means of evaluative and connotative language. Metaphors, in particular, have largely contributed to the general acceptance of these ideologically driven plots which portray migrants as natural calamities, invaders, terrorists or criminals, and arguably played a major role in the electoral success experienced by a

number of far-right European political parties over the past few years, as well as in the outcome of the UK's Brexit referendum.

Public discourse on migration has also been the focus of scholarly attention. Within the framework of critical discourse studies, much research was devoted to European news coverage, highlighting the negative attitude that a constant exposure to the news narrative may trigger (Eberl *et al.* 2018). However, most research concentrates on European media outlets. Arab media and news websites are far less investigated. Yet, Arab countries are directly involved in this scenario and, as we have seen, migration in the MENA region is a multifaceted problem. As part of a wider research project, conducted on migration discourse in the Arab press (Ammar and Murgia 2022), this paper seeks to explore whether, and to which extent, the metaphorical representation of migrants and refugees in Arabic digital media reflects the complexity and many-sidedness of human experience. The hegemony of English as a global language has deeply affected news translation; this is quite evident from the figurative language that media Arabic is constantly borrowing. Through the lens of metaphorical framing analysis, the aim of this paper is to assess whether the Arab media discourse challenges the European dominant narrative on migration, or if it rather contributes to its reproduction and re-instantiation.

2. Theoretical framework

Informed by the broader theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Studies, the present article adopts an integrated approach to metaphorical framing in news discourse and cognition. Since the so-called cognitive revolution, scientific research has constantly provided evidence that metaphor – far from being merely a matter of language – is deeply embedded in our way of thinking (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Kövecses 2010). We can think of conceptual metaphor as a cognitive device that makes certain fields of knowledge accessible by mapping abstract notions (target domains) onto concrete ones (source domains), enabling us to understand the abstract through something grounded in our experience. Each conceptual metaphor is, then, realized in everyday language through conventionalized expressions. Therefore, metaphors have a dramatic impact on our perception of the world, as well as on the way we order and structure our knowledge. Because language and discourse are so closely interwoven, metaphors also play a pivotal role in discursive practices that shape our systems of values and beliefs

as well as our social relationships, thus contributing to transforming society (Doering 2003). In this sense, metaphor has far-reaching implications for how we set problems, bringing into existence new perspectives on the world, new ways of looking at things (Schön 1993). This particular perspective that metaphors establish on a topic, is often referred to as *frame*, whereas the process of using language in order to set such a perspective is usually defined as *framing*. To be sure, *frame* and *framing* are still debated notions lacking a univocal and accepted definition in the scientific community. Following Fillmore, some authors employ the word frame as a synonym for cognitive schema, while some others use the same term in reference to a pattern of language use (Ritchie 2013). For the purpose of this investigation, I will assume the broader definition of *framing* given by Entman:

> Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (1993, 53)

Hence, *framing* is a discursive process by which certain features of a given subject are highlighted at the expense of others. *Frames* are, so to speak, defined by what they highlight as well as by what they omit, thus making some bits of information more noticeable or memorable to the receiver, who will likely perceive them as more meaningful, and consequently process and store them in his memory. More importantly, *frames* can affect the way a problem is presented, ergo exerting significant influence over the identification of causes, entailing moral judgements and propounding suggestions or strategies for possible solutions.

Metaphorical framing in news discourse has an even greater cognitive potential due to its cumulative and continuous nature. Recent research has shown that conventionalized metaphors used to frame migrants and migration today, are based on inherited tropes, implying that a coherent view has uninterruptedly been disseminated over the last two centuries (Taylor 2021). In fact, the systematic use of metaphorical frames across media texts strengthens the persuasiveness of the message they convey, to the point of creating a narrative, or a "myth", in the sense proposed by Charteris-Black: "Myths are explanatory narratives for anything that requires an explanation and therefore purport to be a set of truths. […] Myth engages the hearer through a narrative

that embodies a set of beliefs expressing aspects of the unconscious (2009, 100).

The vast majority of tropes used in news discourse conceptualize migrants as a threat for social security, either by drawing on dehumanizing stereotypes that portray them as floods, waves, natural disasters (Musolff 2015), pollutants and parasites (Cisneros 2008), or by likening them to invaders and criminals (O'Brien 2003). In all cases, these metaphors serve the purpose of reinforcing both conscious and subliminal fears, while providing argumentative support and moral grounds for taking actions against them (Nilsen 2017). The social community and the nation are construed accordingly, either as a vulnerable physical body or as a confined space with walls separating insiders from outsiders. Nevertheless, immigrants may also be represented as objects or commodities, especially when considered in terms of labour force.

One further theoretical issue to be addressed in the specific context of Arab news discourse, is the impact of translation on Media Arabic. Empirical evidence and qualitative research suggest that recent developments in the Arabic language can be attributed to the fact that news production relies heavily on foreign material (Abdalla 2018). Some scholars claim that the all-pervasive adoption of English idiomatic expressions and specialized terminologies is resulting in a phenomenon of concealed linguistic and epistemic shift. The persistent imitation of foreign language forms has produced some sort of cultural dissonance, to which metaphors are no exception. In most cases, literal translation is believed to cause an incongruity between the source and target versions of news stories, thus reframing the narrative in such a way as to elicit specific responses from the receivers (Darwish 2009).

3. Methodology

The corpus for this study consists of 52 articles (31,008 words) accessed from the following online media sources: *hespress.com* (Morocco), *alchourouk.com* (Tunisia), *akhbarlibya24.net* (Libya), *youm7.com* (Egypt), *al-akhbar.com* and *annahar.com* (Lebanon). Digital platforms were selected based on their popularity, according to a survey conducted by *alexa.com* in 2016[2]. Data was

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[2] As of May 1, 2022, the company is no longer operating. However, all consulted digital platforms are still among the most prominent and influential media sources in the region. In particular, according to *SimilarWeb* statistics, *hespress.com* and *youm7.com* are the most visited news websites in their respective countries, https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/ (23/04/2023).

collected through searches, using the generic keywords "migration" (*hiğra*), "migrant" (*muhāğir*), "asylum" (*luğū´*) and "refugee" (*lāği´*). All articles were written in Arabic and published in 2015, when the Syrian crisis reached its climax. Since this paper does not address the issue of genre or text-type, both reporting and commentary articles were included for the study.

Metaphor Identification was carried out by applying the four-step MIP procedure (Pragglejaz 2007). After reading each article for general understanding, lexical units were manually highlighted in the text; their contextual meaning was then analysed and assessed against any existing more basic or concrete meaning in use. According to MIP a lexical unit is considered to be metaphorically used when its contextual meaning differs from its basic meaning, but can be understood in comparison with it: for instance, the word "flow" (*tadaffuq*) used in reference to migrants as in the expression "flow of migrants" (*tadaffuq al-muhāğirīn*), can be contrasted with (but understood through) its basic meaning of "flowing movement in a stream". The online monolingual dictionary almaany.com and the bilingual dictionary Arabic-English by Hans Wehr were taken as reference for this purpose.

245 items met the above criteria and were successively tagged, according to subjacent conceptual metaphors. Now, these conceptual metaphors can be classified in a variety of different ways: a major distinction can be drawn between those that assign migrants human agency (INVADERS, CRIMINALS) and those that don't (LIQUID, PRESSURE, DISEASE). But since different metaphorical expressions can evoke the same scenario, serving similar argumentative functions, linguistic expressions were grouped conveniently into eight different categories, based on the type of narrative they frame. All expressions associated with *military jargon* were gathered together because they conceptualize migrants as invaders or enemies. Liquid metaphors such as waves, floods and flows were paired with earthquakes and fires under a single label, for all of them frame *natural disasters*. While part of the larger category of dehumanizing metaphors, these expressions that conceptualize migrants as germs or parasites were set apart under the label *disease*, for they construe host societies as physical bodies. *Pressure* and *container* metaphors were analysed separately, too: although they both construe the nation as a confined space, they provide slightly different perspectives, for the former focuses on the force exerted on the container's wall, whereas the latter focuses on the container itself. Metaphoric expressions conceiving migrants in terms of labour force or economic resources were labelled as *commodities*. A significant number of

recurring utterances, which seem to highlight the risks connected with irregular migration across the sea, were grouped under the label *dissuasion*. All remaining metaphoric expressions were recorded as *other*. Finally, relative frequencies expressed as a percentage rounded to the second decimal place, were calculated for each category and separately for each media source.

4. Analysis

4.1 *Emigration*

While the news items chosen for this study offer heterogeneous perspectives on the subject of migration, media outlets seem to share a set of language conventions. This is quite evident from the recurring expressions which liken migration across the Mediterranean to a journey unavoidably ending with death, as shown in the following excerpt:

> 1- *Wa-l-qāṣidūn li-l-ǧanūb al-isbānī yufaḍḍilūn qawārib al-mawt li-bulūġ ḥulmi-him al-ūrūbī* / And those heading to the Spanish South prefer the boats of death in order to reach their European dream (*hespress.com* Sep 4)

Phrases such as the boats of death (*qawārib al-mawt*), migration to death (*al-hiǧra fī l-mawt*), a trip to the unknown (*riḥla ilà l-maǧhūl*), the Mediterranean graveyard (*maqbarat al-mutawassiṭ*), the European dream (*al-ḥulm al-ūrūbī*) were found in several articles across all selected media outlets, with the sole exception of *youm7.com*. Although they are mostly loan translations, these pervasive tropes – which I have called *dissuasion metaphors* – share the same argumentative force, for they all aim at discouraging people from embarking by sea. The word 'death' recurring as a second term in the annexation replaces the actual destination of the journey. Europe is framed as an unattainable dream or even a mirage, whereas the sea itself is conceptualized as a huge cemetery. The highest values of relative frequency for this type of metaphors were found in *akhbarlibya24.net* (31,25%) and *hespress.com* (29,72%), consistently reflecting the difficulties that Morocco and Libya experience in preventing irregular migration on the Western and Central routes of the Mediterranean.

Metaphorical language, framing migration as a natural disaster and migrants as waves or floods, is also widespread and evenly distributed among media platforms, though *youm7.com* turned out to have the highest relative frequency (75%). LIQUID metaphors, in particular, are characterized by a high degree of conventionality: this feature, coupled with the morphological structure of the

Arabic language, provides their linguistic instances with lexical richness and adaptivity. Other than the word 'wave' (*mawǧa*), the verbal roots 'overflow' (*fāḍa*), 'leak' (*sāla*), 'drown' (*ġaraqa*), 'pour out' (*tadaffaqa*), 'flood' (*ġamara*) are commonly used in reference to migration discourse, also in their nominalized and participial forms. Here's an example:

> 2- *Qālat al-šurṭa inna-hā «ġaraqat» amām aʻdād al-lāǧiʼīn allaḏīn tadaffaqū fī nihāyat al-usbūʻ* / The police said they drowned beneath the numerous refugees pouring out over the weekend (*youm7.com* Oct 26)

Despite their conventionality, metaphors framing natural disasters have a powerful dehumanizing effect operating at the subliminal level, a point I will return to in the final section. In like manner, DISEASE metaphors remove human qualities from refugees and migrants, and conceptualize them as infectious bacteria or pollutants; hosting societies or countries are, then, implicitly construed as disabled bodies in need of assistance, legitimizing any action taken as a remedy. These metaphors are sometimes instantiated by words like 'infection' (*ʻadwà*) or 'stroke' (*ṣadma*), though they are more often realized by means of verbs such as 'treat' (*ʻālaǧa*) or 'suffer' (*ʻānà*). Excerpts 3 and 4 show how some of these terms are used in context:

> 3- *Wa-l-kull yaʻlam anna muʻālaǧat hāḏihi al-ẓāhira laysa ʻalà šawāṭiʼ Zuwāra aw mudun al-šāṭiʼ* / Everyone knows that the cure for this phenomenon is not on the shores of Zuwara or the other coastal towns (*alchourouk.com* Sep 29)

> 4- *Wa-lā yanfaṣil ʻan ḏālika tasāruʻ intišār ʻadwà al-hiǧra* / Inseparable from this is the accelerated spread of the disease of migration (*al-akhbar.com* July 14)

PRESSURE, CONTAINER and WAR metaphors contribute in different ways to the construal of possibly the most persuasive myth circulating in news discourse. In such narrative, migrants keep the semantic feature of 'human'; yet, they are not portrayed as individuals, but rather as hordes of invaders or criminals on the verge of wreaking havoc on the intended host country. This latter, is implicitly or explicitly decoded as an enclosed space whose walls are about to fall down, under the external pressure exerted by these armies of enemies. What sets this representation apart from other frames, is the active role and volition assigned to migrants, which is taken as a justification for promoting action against them as self-defense. That is the narrative that most

compellingly affected public opinion in the Brexit referendum, and which also left its legacy in the Arab media discourse, where the lexical repertoire, belonging to the semantic field of war, offers a wide range of choices. Migrants' agency is manifested in verbs like 'conquer' (*ġazā*), 'invade' (*iġtāḥa* or *ṭaġà*), 'assault' (*iqtaḥama*), 'plunder' (*iktasaḥa*), 'besiege' (*ḥāṣara*), whereas defensive action is usually instantiated by the roots 'defend' (*ḥāmà*), 'struggle' (*ḥāraba* or *kāfaḥa*), 'resist' *(taṣaddà)*. WAR and CONTAINER metaphors can sometimes overlap in phrases such as 'border defense' (*ḥimāyat al-ḥudūd*) or 'erect a wall' (*aqāma al-ğidār*). The analysis suggests that *akhbarlibya24.net* resorts to this type of narrative far more than any platform, with a relative frequency of 46,87%:

> 5- *Al-ğihāt al-mas'ūla fī madīnat Binġāzī a'lanat qillat imkāniyyāti-hā wa-ğihāziyyati-hā li-muḥārabat hāḏihi al-ẓāhira* / The responsible authorities in Benghazi admitted their lack of capabilities and equipment to combat this phenomenon (*akhbarlibya24.net* Aug 9)

OBJECT metaphors are also fairly frequent throughout the corpus. However, *hespress.com* is the only news outlet specifically interested in the Arab diaspora. This is proved by the fact that it dedicates significant space to the causes and effects of brain drain on the region, reflecting on emigrants in terms of commodities or economic resources, and often resorting to metaphorical or rather metonymical expressions such as 'brain migration' (*hiğrat al-admiġa*), 'migrating skills' (*al-kafā'āt al-muhāğira*), 'qualified human resources' (*al-mawārid al-bašariyya al-mu'ahhala*):

> 6- *Hiğrat al-admiġa naḥwa Ūrūbā tuwāzīhā hiğra uḥrà aḥaḏat fī l-irtifā' wa hiya hiğrat al-ṭalaba* / The brain drain towards Europe is paralleled by another drain that is on the rise, which is students' migration (*hespress.com* Apr 28)

It is worth noticing that cultural metaphors are virtually absent from the corpus, the only exception being a couple of occurrences of the phrase 'season of migration' (*mawsim al-hiğra*), which is a clear reference to the classic postcolonial novel *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih. The unabridged title of the Salih's novel also appears in the title of a rather sarcastic article published on *alchourouk.com*:

> 7- *Mawsim al-hiğra ilà l-šamāl» ğarīmat al-'aṣr...* / Season of Migration to the North the crime of the century… (*alchourouk.com* Aug 26)

4.2 Immigration

The same metaphorical language used to frame emigration in the Arab media is still pervasive in framing discourse on immigration. Although *hespress.com* and *akhbarlibya24.net* do actually devote some space to reporting on inbound migrants, this subsection will deal exclusively with Syrian refugees in Lebanon. As a matter of fact, the escalation of the Syrian crisis in 2015 had a far greater impact on Lebanon than on any other country in the region. Local media were deeply engaged in covering the events, without sparing the Lebanese Government's due criticism for its handling of a crisis that worsened an already precarious socio-economic situation. On the contents level, the extensive coverage of *annahar.com* and *al-akhbar.com* adopts a rather sympathetic attitude towards both refugees and Lebanese citizens, while disapproving of the state's mismanagement of the case. Yet, metaphorical language seems to foster a narrative, where Lebanon is construed as a container/building or as a physical body (Goatly 2007, Ritchie 2013). The first narrative entails the idea that national security depends on a full control of the inflow and outflow of people and goods across its boundaries/walls, whereas the latter assumes that external agents may cause physical disease. Consistently, Syrian migrants are represented by means of LIQUID or INVASION metaphors, as demonstrated in the next few excerpts, taken from an article published by *annahar.com* on January 5th:

8- *Al-Ḥamrā mā 'ādat lubnāniyya… al-tawassu' al-sūrī ġayyara huwiyyata-hā* / Al-Hamra is no longer Lebanese… the Syrian expansion changed its identity

9- *Al-Ḥamrā ṣārat al-yawm sawdā* / Today, al-Hamra has turned "black"

10- *Al-Ḥamrā al-yawm taftaqid ahla-hā […] Al-dīmūġrāfiyya taġayyarat fī l-Ḥamrā, ṭaġà al-sūriyyūn 'alà l-mašhad* / Al-Hamra today yearns for its people […] Demography has changed in al-Hamra, after Syrians, invaded the scene

11- *Al-sūriyyūn iḥtallū al-balad* / Syrians occupied the country

12- *Al-lubnāniyyūn yaġībūn 'an al-mašhad fīmā al-sāḥa ḫāliya li-l-lāǧi'īn al-sūriyyīn allaḏīn fāḍ 'adadu-hum fī Lubnān* / The Lebanese are absent from the scene, while the arena is free for Syrian refugees whose number has overflowed in Lebanon

The whole piece is a report on the demographic impact that Syrian migrations has had on the central district of al-Hamra in Beirut. Most lexical items, belonging to the military jargon, conceptualize refugees as invaders, and

point to a concern for potential miscegenation between Lebanese and Syrians. This is quite evident in excerpt 8, and further reinforced in excerpt 9, which is a racist pun insinuating that al-Hamra (literally 'the red one') has turned 'black' due to the massive presence of Syrian immigrants, who are generally perceived as having a darker complexion. In excerpt 10 the district itself is personified as someone yearning for its Lebanese inhabitants; Syrian citizens are – so to speak – the unwanted content of al-Hamra/the container. Finally, excerpt 12 represents Syrian refugees as a liquid overflowing inside the nation/container, that is Lebanon. A similar perspective is provided by the news item published by *al-akhbar.com* on February 11:

> 13- *Li-hāḏihi «al-ḫalṭa al-sukkāniyya» ta'ṯīrāt wa-in'ikāsāt 'adīda fī ẓill ġiyāb siyāsāt sukkāniyya taqūm 'alà mabda' al-indimāǧ* / This population mixture may have many effects and repercussions in the absence of population policies based on the principle of integration

> 14- *Yu'akkid Ḥamdān anna al-'unṣuriyya sa-tazdād wa-sa-tataḍa'af ẓāhirat al-tahmīš al-iǧtimā'ī fī l-aḥyā' al-faqīra ḥayṯu sa-tartafi' mu'addalāt al-tasawwul wa-l-ittiǧār bi-l-bašar, mā ya'nī fi'liyyan annanā amām muǧtama' mutafaǧǧir* / Hamdan assures that racism and social marginalization will increase in poor areas, whereas the rate of scrounging and human trafficking will rise; we are truly in front of an exploded society

Concerns are not limited to identity issues, but they are also directed to the potential demographic unbalances and social disorder that the presence of Syrian refugees might bring about. The Lebanese social community is viewed as a homogenous physical body in precarious health conditions, whose survival is jeopardized by the massive arrival of migrants, who are – by inference – construed as pathogenic agents.

This anxiety is even more obvious in the article published by al-*akhbar.com* on April 9th, about the local community of al-Qaa (a border-town north-east of the Bekaa Valley), feeling anxiety and distress after the governor announced the intention of establishing the first official refugee camp for Syrians on a plot of land provided by the municipality. Despite the explicit criticism expressed against the state's handling of the issue, refugees are referred to by means of a DISEASE metaphor:

> 15- *'Alat al-aṣwāt al-muntaqida li-l-dawla ǧarrā' 'adam waḍ'i-hā siyāsāt li-l-ta'āmul ma'a al-ṣadma allatī ḍarabat al-balad* / Critical voices arose against the state for not putting in place policies to deal with the stroke that hit the country

The PRESSURE metaphor, as already mentioned above, is yet another trope commonly used to dehumanize refugees. In the detailed account on the demographic changes that affected Jordan and Lebanon over the past thirty years, *al-akhbar.com* conceptualizes Syrians as natural forces (waves and pressure), while implicitly evoking the container metaphor. This news item was published on May 25:

16- *La-qad ḫalaqa al-ṣirāʿ al-sūrī taḥaddiyāt inmāʾiyya hāʾila li-l-buldān al-muğāwira, laysa faqaṭ bi-sabab al-mawğā al-ḍaḥma min al-bašar allaḏīn yanšudūn malāḏ āmin min al-ʿunf al-damawī* / The Syrian conflict has created enormous challenges for neighbouring countries, not only because of the huge waves of people seeking refuge from bloody violence

17- *Bi-l-nisbat ilà Lubnān, hāḏā al-ḍaġṭ yumkin an yušakkil ḫaṭaran ʿalà wuğūdihi* / For Lebanon, this pressure may constitute a threat to its existence

A rather compelling narrative is fostered by a combination of LIQUID, CONTAINER and DISEASE metaphors in the news item published by *annahar.com* on March 12:

18- *Ḫarāʾiṭ tawzīʿāt al-lāğiʾīn: Lubnān muḫayyam kabīr* / Refugee distribution maps: Lebanon is a big camp

19- *Lubnān […] muhaddad bi-l-inhiyār inna tadaffuq malyūn lāğiʾ masʾūliyya ḍaḥma fī ayy balad, fa-kayfa bi-Lubnān dawla ṣaġīra tuʿānī min ṣuʿūbāt dāḫiliyya? inna-hu la-taʾṯīr muḏhil* / Lebanon is threatened with collapse: «The influx of a million refugees is a huge responsibility in any country. So how about Lebanon, a small country that suffers from internal difficulties? Its impact is amazing»

20 - *Wa-hiya muʿṭayāt wāḍiḥa min al-ḫarāʾiṭ allatī našarat-hā al-mufawwaḍiyya al-ʿulyā wa-allatī tubayyin ḍaḥāmat tadaffuqāt al-nāziḥīn wa-intišāri-him al-sarīʿ fī kāmil al-arāḍī al-lubnāniyya* / Data in the maps published by the High Commissioner clearly show the huge flow of displaced people and their rapid spread throughout the Lebanese territory

Here Lebanon is construed both as a container and as a physical body. From a cognitive perspective, stating that Lebanon is a big camp entails that the whole of its territory is crowded with refugees, which is clearly a dramatization of reality. The quoted speech in excerpt 19, instead, suggests that the country is an aching body, threatened with extinction by a massive influx of refugees. It is worthwhile pointing out that quoted speech – just like statistics – should not necessarily be considered a way for keeping a neutral stance, but is often used as a strategy for enhancing credibility. In excerpt 20, the data drawn from

United Nations documents, adds to the information reliability, thus making the scenario of a huge flow of migrants spreading like a disease across the country, more plausible to the reader.

5. Discussion and final remarks

Metaphorical language analysis suggests a general tendency towards the reproduction of frames that reverberate the narrative circulating in European news discourse. All the media outlets under consideration make use, in varying degrees, of the same tropes that have been self-perpetuating in Western rhetoric over the last two centuries. Migrants and refugees are ordinarily represented by means of metaphors that strip them of their human features, prompting similar cognitive responses: whether associated with natural forces or with military invasions, human mobility is perceived as a menace to national security and to the biological integrity of host societies.

Content analysis, on the other hand, reveals a far more nuanced, complex and pragmatic discourse. Some of the articles published on North-African digital platforms are permeated by overt criticism of the European attitude towards migration. For example, in the item issued by *alchourouk.com* on August 7th, the EU approach to the crisis is deemed as simplistic and inhuman, and its 'lame policies' (*al-siyāsāt al-'arğā'*) are judged as short sighted and driven by the logic of exclusion. Similarly, in the Lebanese context, both *annahar.com* and *al-akhbar.com* have a strong stance against the government's handling of the Syrian crisis, and are rather sympathetic towards refugees, thoroughly accounting for the trying conditions they experience. Moroccan *hespress.com* provides a lucid picture of the repercussions of skilled emigration on national economy, while addressing the issue of integration for sub-Saharan immigrants. Yet, all these articles are replete with conventional metaphors that do not challenge at all the dominant European perspective.

There are conflicting narratives emerging from the overall text analysis: articulated accounts of experienced realities are blurred by the cognitive frames that metaphorical expressions activate. Such inconsistency may be attributed to the constraints that influence translation-mediated news production in the Arab world. Ali Darwish (2009) provides evidence that verbatim translation into Arabic of English metaphors, determines – in most cases – a dissonance between epistemic knowledge and linguistic patterns, resulting in a misalignment between source and target versions of news stories. However, in

the long run, due to their propositional form, metaphors tend to restore a consonance between the epistemic and linguistic realities. In this sense, culturally dissonant metaphors can creep into a target language and reframe social semiotics, thus redefining cognitive patterns and world views. This soft imposition of new mental structures is an expression of the asymmetric interaction that characterizes media imperialism, a key branch of cultural imperialism (Phillipson 1992).

Now, it could be argued that the vast majority of metaphors, which creeped into Arab media discourse, are highly conventionalized linguistic expressions and do not reflect the stance of the writer or the news outlet considered. Nonetheless, we should remember that human cognition and language processing mostly occurs at the unconscious level (Kihlstrom 1987), and that any written text – like a news report – enjoys a certain semantic autonomy, which matters more than what the author meant to say (Kitis and Milapides 1997). Hence, these imported metaphors can take on a life of their own in the host linguistic environment, and reframe social reality in such a way as to define new cognitive patterns. By this I do not imply that the reframing effect will systematically alter the audience cognition: prior individual experience and social context also play a crucial role in media text decoding process, possibly leading to very different receptions (Graber 1988, Gamson *et al.* 1992, Entman 1993). As for conventionality, it should be pointed out that the language use of common metaphors suggests that readers are encouraged to accept them without any deliberate reflection (El Refaie 2001); conventional metaphors do not require the recipient's interpretative act, precisely because they are deeply entrenched in the collective unconscious (Arcimaviciene and Baglama 2018), and because the system of values they promote has become widely accepted among the community (Charteris Balck 2009).

Regardless of the epistemic dissonance that translation induces, most of the metaphorical language used in the articles examined, can potentially redefine social cognition and strengthen both individual and collective subliminal fear. In the case of the Syrian crisis, the construal of Lebanon as a physical body suffering from an infection caused by external bacteria, reinforces the narrative that refugees are a menace to the biological integrity of the country, thus engendering some sort of 'miscegenophobia'. Dehumanising and invasion metaphors can also reframe the public debate around migration in such a way as to entail that migrants are a threat to the community. Not only will this hinder social integration, but it will also legitimize taking action against

them, as a means of public protection (O'Brien 2003). As already suggested by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies: once a metaphor has redefined a social reality, it can provide guides for future actions that will fit the metaphor and eventually reinforce its power.

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