

The 1923 Egyptian Mahmal Incident: A Historical Analysis of Al-Qibla's Political Coverage

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As the official newspaper representing the Hijaz government, Al-Qibla documented the incident of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal returning to Egypt without performing the Hajj rituals in 1341 AH / 1923 AD, through media coverage that discussed the details and circumstances of this incident. This study aims to analyse Al-Qibla's coverage of the incident. Using a descriptive methodology to interpret events within their historical and political contexts. Additionally, the study-relies on the analysis of numerical data derived from historical records to provide a clearer understanding of the media and historical perspectives related to the incident. The study reveals that Al-Qibla's media coverage was not merely a documentation of the event but served as a political tool employed by the Hijaz government to strengthen its position regarding the return of the Mahmal and highlight its independent decision-making in managing Hajj affairs. This coverage occurred within the context of tense relations between the Hejaz and Egypt, as a result of British interventions that sought to strengthen their influence in the region by fueling disputes between Arab countries .

Keywords: Al-Qibla, Egyptian Hajj Mahmal, Egyptian-Hejazi relations, British colonial intervention.

The Egyptian Mahmal pilgrimage was an annual tradition maintained by the Egyptian state, accompanied by an official delegation tasked with delivering the Kiswah (the covering of the Kaaba) and distributing gifts and charitable donations to the needy in Mecca. This practice bore symbolic meanings that intertwined religious patronage with political influence, rendering it a significant tool in shaping relations between Egypt and the Hijaz, particularly in the context of the political transformations that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Hashemite rule in the region (Al-Mansour, 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study examines the incident surrounding the return of the Egyptian Mahmal in 1923. This incident greatly strained the political and religious relationship between the Egyptian government and the newly formed Hashemite regime in the Hijaz during the early 20th century. It occurred within a complex regional context shaped by the aftermath of World War I and the influence of colonial powers-

particularly Britain, which exercised indirect control over Egypt and played a key role in shaping the political dynamics of the Arabian Peninsula.

Method

This study adopts a dual methodological approach that combines qualitative and quantitative content analysis to offer a comprehensive reading of Al-Qibla's treatment of the 1923 incident. The first part offers a descriptive and contextual analysis to examine the historical content, while the second part applies quantitative textual methods through a digital analysis of the relevant newspaper issues. This aims to extract numerical indicators to evaluate the Media Coverage and to interpret the political and media dimensions of the incident within its historical context.

Research Problem

This study addresses the following central question: How did Al-Qibla's coverage of the 1923 Egyptian Mahmal incident reflect the political orientations of the Hashemite government in the Hijaz? Moreover, what rhetorical strategies did the newspaper employ to articulate the Hijazi narrative of the event within the broader context of the post-World War I struggle over religious legitimacy and political influence in the Arabian Peninsula?

Literature Review

Although numerous studies have addressed the relationship between Egypt and the Hijaz, particularly in relation to pilgrimage and religious institutions, the 1923 Mahmal incident has received limited scholarly attention. Most academic works have focused on the 1926 incident, which led to the Egyptian government's suspension of the Mahmal and financial allocations to the Two Holy Mosques for over a decade. The significance of the present study lies in its focus on an underexplored historical event and its reliance on a primary source—Al-Qibla—that has yet to be examined systematically. Moreover, the study contributes to filling a research gap in the literature on early Arab journalism and its role in shaping political discourse in the Arab East during the 1920s.

Preliminary Historical Study

Egyptian Mahmal: Religious and Political Symbolism

The Egyptian Mahmal stood out from those sent by other Islamic countries to the Hijaz due to its strong religious and political symbolism. Since Sultan Al-Zahir Baybars (r. 1260–1277 CE) transferred the privilege of manufacturing the Kaaba's cloth to Egypt in 1266 AH (Youssef, 1937), the Egyptian Mahmal became responsible for carrying the Kaaba's covering (Kiswah), along with a ceremonial cloth (Surra) containing donations and gifts to be distributed to the needy in the two holy cities. This became an annual tradition, celebrated with official and popular events across Egyptian cities. The Mahmal would proceed in a formal procession, accompanied by flags, Qur'anic recitations, scholars, Huffaz (Qur'an memorizers), and soldiers (Al-Kharboutli, 1991).

Over time, this repeated ceremonial practice transformed the Mahmal into a multidimensional symbol of what can be described as Egypt's "symbolic hegemony" over the two holy cities, presenting itself as a guardian of Islamic sacred sites (Rifaat, 2015). This symbolism was further reinforced by Egypt's close relationship with the Sharif of Mecca, which allowed Cairo to maintain a presence in the Hijaz. The reception of the Egyptian Mahmal in Jeddah often reflected the political dynamics between Cairo and the Hijaz, serving as an indicator of cooperation or

tension. The associated ceremonies and religious speeches frequently carried political messages directed both domestically and internationally (Anqawi, 1972).

At the beginning of the 20th century, especially after World War I, the Mahmal's status came under challenge due to regional political shifts, most notably, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of the Hashemites in the Hijaz, and the growing influence of Britain in Egypt. During this period, the Mahmal became a symbolic battleground for the legitimacy of overseeing Islamic holy sites. This tension culminated in the incidents involving the Egyptian Mahmal in 1923 and 1926. In response, King Abdulaziz Al-Saud issued a decree to end the tradition, forbidding Egypt from offering gifts to the Sharifs of the Hijaz or needy pilgrims. He also established a factory in the Hijaz to produce the Kaaba's cloth locally. In doing so, King Abdulaziz rejected any religious symbol that could represent external religious or political authority over the Hijaz (Qariqli, 2015).

Al-Qibla Newspaper: The Voice of the Hashemite Government

Al-Qibla was the first Arab Hashemite newspaper, established under the patronage of Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca. It was the official mouthpiece of the Hashemite political leadership, promoting its nationalist and liberationist goals. Closely tied to the project of the Great Arab Revolt, the newspaper played a key role in articulating the Arab anti-Ottoman discourse and presenting Sharif Hussein as the Arab leader who would unite the Arab nation (Khalidi, 2004).

Sharif Hussein bin Ali ordered the newspaper to be printed at the Royal Press in Ajyad Fortress in Mecca (Wahim, 1985), with two issues per week—Mondays and Thursdays—each four pages. The first issue was published on Monday, 15 Shawwal 1334 AH (15 August 1916 CE) and continued for about eight years. The last issue, number 823, was dated Safar 1343 AH (dated September 25, 1924 ¹CE)

The newspaper explicitly stated its mission in a motto that appeared on the front page of every issue: "A newspaper for Islam and the Arabs." Its role was to publish political, military, social, and religious news from the Arab and Islamic world and from around the world in general. This was evident in its interaction with the Arab and international press, exchanging news, articles, and correspondence with various newspapers, magazines, and news agencies (Al-Jawarna, 2012).

From its inception until 1920, the paper was managed by the famous Islamic preacher Sheikh Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib who was titled "Editor-in-Chief". Hassan al-Subban succeeded him from Morocco, who oversaw the publication until 1924 (Osman, 1997). Among the notable contributors was Sharif Hussein bin Ali himself—may he rest in peace—who personally oversaw the editorial direction of the newspaper and wrote many of the articles. The editorial team included famous Arab nationalists such as Fouad Al-Khatib², the poet of the Arab Revolt, and Jamil Al-Azm³, and many intellectuals who worked for the advancement of the Arab nation (Al-Qibla, 2016).

The newspaper is a must primary reference for researchers studying Hashemite policy in the Hejaz. It documents the government's stance on Arab and regional issues and shows how the Hashemite leadership used political discourse and media to promote the vision and aspirations of Sharif Hussein bin Ali amidst the regional political changes.

The Historical Treatment of the Press Coverage of the Return of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal in 1923, as Covered by Al-Qibla

Al-Qibla covered the incident of the return of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal without performing the Hajj rituals in 1923, within issues (704-723). This special press coverage included the following:

The Official Statement of the Hijaz Government Regarding the Incident

The government of the Kingdom of Hijaz announced that on Friday, July 11, 1923, the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal returned from Jeddah to Suez, along with all those accompanying it, without completing the pilgrimage rituals. Given the significance of this incident, the government issued an official statement published in the editorial of issue 704 of Al-Qibla newspaper, dated July 16, 1923. The statement included all the telegrams⁴ exchanged between the governments of Hijaz and Egypt. It confirmed that the dispute began when the Egyptian government, contrary to the customary annual practice, decided to send two medical delegations with the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal. Each delegation consisted of two doctors and two pharmacists⁵, with one delegation stationed at the Egyptian⁶ Takiyya in Mecca and the other at the Mahmal station in Jeddah⁷(Al-Qibla,2016, issue 704).

It appears that the Egyptian government based its decision to send the two medical delegations on a report submitted by Mabrouk Fahmy Pasha, the Emir of the Egyptian Hajj mission in 1922. The report highlighted the poor healthcare services provided by the Hijaz government to pilgrims and stressed the need for a medical mission to assist patients, given the scarcity of doctors in Hijaz (Abdelmoula, 2020). However, the Hijaz government rejected this decision, considering it an unacceptable interference in its internal affairs. Instead, it demanded that the Egyptian Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) fulfil its obligation to provide the designated endowments for the Two Holy Mosques (Al-Qibla,2016, issue 704). Historically, Egypt had regularly sent both monetary and in-kind aid to Hijaz, with the value fluctuating annually (Bayoumi, 2001). However, due to British interventions and their influence on Egyptian financial policies, these contributions had significantly declined since 1922 (Al-Momani, 2006).

The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to link the issue of endowments owed by the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf to the Hijaz government with the request to allow the medical delegations. It justified its position by asserting that the endowment matter was a separate issue that could be discussed and resolved at another time. In contrast, the medical delegations were purely a humanitarian concern, and thus, the Egyptian government urged the Hijaz government to approve their deployment. However, before receiving explicit permission, Egypt had already dispatched the medical teams. Upon their arrival at Jeddah's port on July 3, 1923, the Egyptian Hajj delegate in Jeddah, Dr. Mohamed Amin Abdel Rahman, sent a telegram to the Hijaz government requesting permission to unload the medical equipment. The government denied his request, informing him that the decision regarding the medical delegations had already been settled in prior discussions with the Egyptian government (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 704)⁸.

The Hijaz government attempted to persuade Egypt to reconsider its stance, sending a telegram emphasizing its commitment to maintaining strong and amicable relations between the two nations. The message also noted that the medical delegations' missions were projects that required careful study regarding their content and implications, stressing the need to adhere to existing laws governing the establishment of such medical institutions. Despite multiple discussions and proposed solutions from the Hijaz government aimed at preventing the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal

from returning without completing the Hajj, the Egyptian government refused any resolution that did not include the approval of the medical delegations' settlement in Mecca and Jeddah. Consequently, on Monday, July 12, 1923, the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal returned to Suez without performing Hajj, marking the beginning of a period of strained relations between Egypt and the Kingdom of Hijaz (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 704).

The coverage of the incident reveals the strategic use of a media discourse as a tool to solidify the authority of the King of the Hijaz, establish new boundaries for Hijazi sovereignty, and redefine the relationship with the Islamic world, at a moment when symbols were more expressive than reality. This was confirmed by its editor-in-chief, Hassan al-Subban, who stated that a careful analysis of the events of the Egyptian Mahmal incident in 1923 reveals that the essence of the issue lies in understanding the desired goal behind the stance of each party: the Hijazis and the Egyptians. After the government of the Hijaz realized that the purpose of the demands of the Egyptian government was direct interference in its jurisdiction, diminishing its value and encroaching on its sovereign rights, it decided to reject them and adhere to the principle of its sovereignty and its right to prevent any interference in the affairs of the Hijaz in any form (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 704).

The Coverage of Egyptian Newspapers on the Return of the Mahmal Incident in 1923: An Analysis by Al-Qibla

A close examination of Al-Qibla's editorial approach reveals that it paid significant attention to engaging with the content of Arabic newspapers on various issues. However, despite this general approach, the newspaper explicitly expressed its desire to avoid addressing the content published in Egyptian newspapers concerning the return of the Mahmal. The editor-in-chief justified this decision by stating that the coverage in Egyptian newspapers contained claims that were inconsistent with the truth. Despite this reservation, it yielded to the pressures coming from Egyptian writers and pilgrims, who sought to refute the claims of the Egyptian press, most notably, Al-Ahram newspaper. The newspaper republished articles and letters refuting what it considered to be journalistic fabrications, as part of a defensive strategy with clear political overtones aimed at exposing the media conspiracies that aim, according to the newspaper's discourse, to undermine the independence of the Hijaz and delegitimize the Hashemite rule.

In this context, Al-Qiblah reflected the diversity of opinions among Egyptian newspapers through its media discourse. Some supported the Egyptian government's decision to recall the Mahmal, others opposed the decision, while some refrained from assigning blame to any Arab party. Instead, they attributed the escalation of tensions surrounding the Mahmal's return to foreign colonial interventions.

Among the materials Al-Qiblah chose to republish were articles, highlighting the hostility of the Egyptian newspapers towards the Hijazi government, which featured a lengthy article titled "They Say with Their Tongues: The Lies of Al-Ahram About the Egyptian Mission." The article, authored by Egyptian pilgrim Abdul Aziz Sabri, warned readers against being misled by the falsehoods propagated by Al-Ahram's editorial management, represented by its Lebanese-born Christian editor-in-chief⁹. He accused him of exploiting the newspaper to serve his religious biases by seizing every opportunity to attack the government of the Holy Lands. This alleged editorial policy was clearly illustrated when Al-Ahram published the Egyptian government's official statement on the Mahmal crisis under the provocative headline: "The Obstinacy and Extremism of the Hejaz Government." The statement noted that the Hejaz government opposed the entry of the Egyptian medical mission, perceiving it as foreign interference and an infringement on its

sovereignty. Al-Ahram's editorial comment on this issue was: "Has anyone ever heard of a government preventing a group of people from entering its land along with their doctors, medicines, and tents? And how could such an act be deemed a violation of sovereignty and interference in internal affairs?". According to Abdul Aziz Sabri, this commentary was intended to fuel resentment among Muslims (Al-Qibla, 1916, Issue 705, p. 3).

In Issue No. 707, published on Thursday, August 2, 1923¹⁰, Al-Qibla printed an article titled: "Indeed, Your Lord Knows Best Who Has Strayed from His Way..." This article was based on a letter received from an Egyptian writer, which contained testimony from several Mahmal officials. They confirmed that all Egyptian pilgrims aboard the Mahmal ship disembarked in Jeddah upon learning of the Egyptian Hajj Amir's decision to return the vessel to Egypt. Only a few officials remained on board, having been prohibited from disembarking by the Amir himself. Upon their arrival in Suez, these officials, including the Amir's secretary, encountered another ship carrying pilgrims heading to Jeddah. They then decided to return with them to perform the pilgrimage, despite obstruction from Egyptian authorities. This eyewitness testimony was cited as evidence to refute the allegations made by Egyptian newspapers against the Hejaz government and its king (Al-Qibla, 2016, Issue 707).

Al-Qibla continued its coverage, responding to Egyptian newspapers that supported the Hejaz government's stance through articles contributed by Egyptian writers. One such piece, published in Al-Muqattam newspaper under the title "The Truth about the Dispute between Egypt and Hejaz," recounted the events surrounding the Mahmal's return. The writer emphasized the importance of Egyptian citizens understanding the real situation and supporting the truth wherever it lies. Additionally, Al-Qibla reprinted a telegram sent to Al-Muqattam by Mr. Hafiz Tuqan, head of the Nablus Islamic Society. In it, he expressed Muslim discontent and rejection of the Egyptian newspapers' hostile rhetoric and their denigration of the King of Hejaz (Al-Qibla, 2016, Issue 707).

In Issue No. 708, Al-Qibla republished an article by Mr. Muhammad Al-Hatari, originally printed in Al-Mu'tadil newspaper under the title "They Speak without Knowledge." After reviewing the Mahmal incident, the author argued that, regardless of the nature of the dispute between the two governments, their relations should return to a state of amity and mutual respect due to their shared religious and national ties (Al-Qibla, 2016, Issue 708).

Egyptian writers also addressed the stance of neutral Egyptian newspapers, which did not attribute the responsibility for the Mahmal's return to any Arab party. Instead, they blamed the escalating tensions on foreign colonial interventions opposed to the decision. Among these was an article by an Egyptian pilgrim who had performed Hajj the year the Mahmal returned to Egypt, published in Al-Balagh, a prominent nationalist newspaper advocating Arab unity (Al-Zirikli, 1980). The writer contended that after the King of Hejaz refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, recognize British and French colonial rule over Arab lands, or accept British guardianship over Hejaz, Britain sought to subjugate Hejaz through political pressure. It cut off financial aid previously pledged to Hejaz and encouraged Ibn Saud to threaten the region. Simultaneously, Britain subtly suggested to the King of Hejaz that only it could shield him from Ibn Saud's threats¹¹. After repeated failures to persuade the King to sign a guardianship treaty, Britain resorted to new tactics. In 1339 AH, it sent a memorandum stating that British India had decided to dispatch a medical mission of thirty doctors, pharmacists, and nurses to assist in Hajj health services. Britain insisted that this delegation participate in setting public health regulations in collaboration with the Hejaz authorities. The King

of Hejaz firmly rejected this, viewing it as direct interference in Hejaz's internal affairs (Al-Qibla, 2016, Issue 706).

The author concluded that both the Egyptian and Hejaz governments had fallen into a trap set by Britain. Their mismanagement of the issue transformed their relations from fraternity to hostility, allowing Britain to achieve its objectives. He concluded with a scathing rebuke of Egyptian newspapers, accusing them of exacerbating the dispute through excessive debate, thus deepening the rift between the two nations (Al-Qibla, 2016, Issue 706).

Al-Qibla was keen on deconstructing the official religious discourse that supported the return of the Mahmal by challenging the fatwas of the Egyptian Mufti and the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, which it saw as instrumentalizing religion to serve political agendas that do not represent Islamic or Arab interests. The editor-in-chief of the newspaper, Hassan al-Subban, presented a counter discourse based on delegitimizing those fatwas, calling for a return to the (maqāṣid) of Sharia, not to the directives of the central authority or the state's jurisprudence (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 710).

Through this analytical reading, it becomes clear that Al-Qibla was not just a platform for voices supporting the Hijaz, but played an interpretive political role, redefining the incident in its editorial stance: defending the independence of the Hijaz, exposing media complicity, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the Hashemite leadership in the face of Egyptian hegemony or British tutelage.

Arab media solidarity and popular reactions to the Mahmal incident.

Al-Qibla's analysis of the Arab newspapers' coverage of the incident of the return of the Egyptian Hajj caravan in 1923 reveals a clear escalation in Arab nationalist discourse and resistance to colonial media narratives. Following its initial interaction with Egyptian newspaper coverage, Al-Qibla expanded its media discourse to include the positions of other Arab newspapers that adopted a supportive stance towards the Hijazi government and rejected the smear attempts carried out by some Egyptian newspapers, including Al-Ahram.

Al-Qibla published in its issue (708) a collection of articles and messages that shed light on a common Arab media discourse characterized by a strong ethos. Among these materials, the newspaper republished an article from the Damascus-based newspaper Al-Ghuraba titled "Al-Hijaz and the Egyptian Press," in which the newspaper asserted that the dispute between the governments of Egypt and Al-Hijaz was an administrative dispute sparked by the Egyptian Amir Al-Hajj. However, the Egyptian newspapers sought to condemn the dispute and turn it into a doctrinal issue to incite public opinion in the Islamic world against the government of Al-Hijaz. The article countered this interpretation by stating that the Egyptian pilgrims performed the rituals in their entirety without any interference from their government, thus denying the religious dimension of the crisis (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 708).

In this context, Al-Qibla republished an article from the newspaper Al-Sharq titled "The Bright Truth in the Mahmal Case", which stated that the government of the Hijaz did not oppose to receiving the Egyptian medical mission in principle, but objected to Cairo's disregard for the traditional protocols followed, and imposed changes that the Hijaz saw as a violation of its sovereignty. The article called for respecting customs as a safeguard for the independence of the decision of the Hijaz (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 708).

Al-Qibla also quoted the Palestinian newspaper Al-Karmel, confirming that the Egyptian media hype about the Mahmal was unjustified, and that the King of the Hijaz's refusal to grant additional privileges to the medical mission was motivated by the desire to prevent precedents that other Arab countries under colonization could exploit to demand similar privileges. Thus, the Hashemite media discourse links medical privileges to colonial risks, presenting the government of the Hijaz as a line of defense for Arab sovereignty (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 708).

Within this common Arab media framework, Al-Qibla published an interview conducted by a Syrian newspaper with Prince Abdullah bin Hussein, in which he expressed his regret for what had happened, indicating that the position of the Hijaz government was simply a commitment to independence, which is a legitimate right for any government. He questioned why Egyptians were objecting to a demand they had long held in their national discourse¹² (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 708).

In addition to the press release, Al-Qibla highlighted a wide popular interaction with the crisis by publishing in the same issue (708) several messages of support from various Arab countries, including a message from the leaders of Karak expressing their gratitude to King Hussein bin Ali for safeguarding the holy land, and a message from an Iraqi pilgrim praising the services provided by the Hijaz government, denying Egyptian claims of neglect or mistreatment of pilgrims (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 708).

The newspaper also published in a later issue (713) protest messages from the people of Beirut, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Sudan to the Egyptian government and the Prime Minister, expressing their rejection of the false accusations spread by Egyptian newspapers against the King of Hijaz, and demanding an end to these media campaigns. Some of them called for boycotting these newspapers and preventing their circulation in Arab countries, emphasizing the importance of Arab understanding and constructive dialogue (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 713).

These telegrams and articles of support highlight that the unified stance of the Hijaz was not limited to pilgrims or religious elites but included individuals from various social groups, such as writers, merchants, doctors, students, and scholars. This indicates that the crisis sparked a popular reaction that transcended the local level, leading to a collective expression of national awareness that rejects the politicization of religious sentiments on one hand, and rejects colonial privileges on the other (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 713).

In conclusion of its coverage of this issue, Al-Qibla in its issue (712) affirmed that the articles and messages it published represent only a small part of the Arab solidarity with the government of the Hijaz, expressing its pride in the Arab spirit of chivalry that stood united against attempts to divide brothers under the guise of religion or humanitarian privileges (Al-Qibla, 2016, issue 712).

A Quantitative Analytical Statistical Study of the Press Coverage Published by Al-Qibla Regarding the Return of the Egyptian Mahmal in 1923

This section of the study employs the quantitative content analysis method as a systematic tool to examine Al-Qibla newspaper's coverage of the return of the Egyptian Hajj caravan in 1923, according to measurable indicators. This method was chosen as it allows for the objective and organized monitoring of media coverage patterns by tracking topic frequency, distribution of information sources, and direction of journalistic discourse. This analysis aims to answer several key questions:

1. What were the priorities in Al-Qibla's coverage of the incident?
2. What types of sources did the newspaper rely on?
3. What was the nature of the journalistic treatment: was Al-Qibla proactive in its coverage, or did it react to what was published, did it express its editorial stance directly, or convey external viewpoints of other parties?

The newspaper articles were classified into three patterns of sources:

- (1) The Official Government Telegrams Included in the Hijaz Government Statement
- (2) Egyptian newspapers, which the newspaper used either by citing their content or critically engaging with their narrative.
- (3) Arab media solidarity and popular reactions to the Mahmal incident. This section includes:
 - * The Coverage of Al-Qibla on the Arab Press Reporting of the Return of the Egyptian Mahmal Incident
 - * Al-Qibla's analysis of Arab Support for the Hijazi Government's Position on the Incident of the Return of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal

The study developed a coding scheme that identifies the key elements in each analytical unit, such as the type of material, its source, size, and overall direction of discourse. This analytical framework enabled the extraction of precise quantitative data, facilitating the inference of objective implications about the newspaper's orientations and editorial choices in dealing with the incident.

The Official Government Telegrams Included in the Hijaz Government Statement

Official government telegrams are among the most important sources that newspapers and magazines rely on in their coverage of events, as they reflect the official stance of the government entity on the matter being covered. Regarding the official telegrams used by Al-Qibla newspaper, it is observed that they were limited to those included in the official statement of the Hijaz government concerning the incident of the return of the Egyptian Mahmal. These telegrams were published in issue No. (704), dated July 16, 1923.

Table 1

Government Telegrams Utilized by Al-Qibla in Constructing Its Coverage of the Caravan Crisis

| No. | Sender | Recipient | Date of Telegram Source |
|-----|---|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Minister of Egyptian Foreign Affairs | Egyptian Consulate | 3 rd Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 2 | Minister of Egyptian Foreign Affairs | Egyptian Consulate | 4 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 3 | Minister of Egyptian Foreign Affairs | Egyptian Consulate | 5 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 4 | Deputy Minister of Egyptian Foreign Affairs | Egyptian Consulate | 6 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 5 | Minister of Egyptian Foreign Affairs | Egyptian Consulate | 7 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 6 | Deputy Minister of Egyptian Foreign Affairs | Egyptian Consulate | 7 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 7 | King Hussein bin Ali | Government of Hijaz | 20 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 8 | Bureau of Al-Istikhbarat (Intelligence) | Government of Hijaz | 20 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 9 | Emir of Hajj, Hijaz | Government of Hijaz | 20 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 10 | Chief Judge of the Hijaz Government | Government of Hijaz | 27 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |
| 11 | Emir of Hajj, Hijaz | Government of Hijaz | 29 th Dhul-Qi'dah 1341 AH |

It is noted from the table(1), that Al-Qibla relied on eleven documents during its coverage of the events. These documents included exchanged messages between representatives of the governments of Hejaz and Egypt, dated within the period from 3 Dhu al-Qi'dah – 29 Dhu al-Qi'dah 1341 AH / April 27 – May 23, 1923, which corresponds to the time the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal spent in the port of Jeddah before its return to Egyptian territory.

The newspaper employed these telegrams to produce a media discourse which could be described as ‘institutional neutrality’, which means publishing the official information without any direct editorial commentary, allowing readers to reach their own conclusions. This provides the newspaper with an objective cover, subtly hiding a slight bias to the Hijazi position.

The importance of these documents was highlighted within the quantitative approach as they form a clear unit of analysis in terms of their sources, dates, and subjects. They also allow the tracking of the incident day by day, adding to the journalistic material a higher level of documentation and reliability. Despite their small number compared to other sources relied upon by the newspaper, their importance lies not in their number density, but in their political and symbolic weight.

Al-Qibla’s Analysis of Egyptian Press Coverage of the Return of the Egyptian Mahmal

During its coverage of the articles, telegrams, and press statements sent by Egyptian writers and pilgrims, Al-Qibla was keen on reviewing all the diverse opinions presented in the Egyptian newspapers. This explains the variety of Egyptian newspapers addressed by Al-Qibla in its analysis of the Egyptian press coverage, as illustrated in the following table.

Table 2

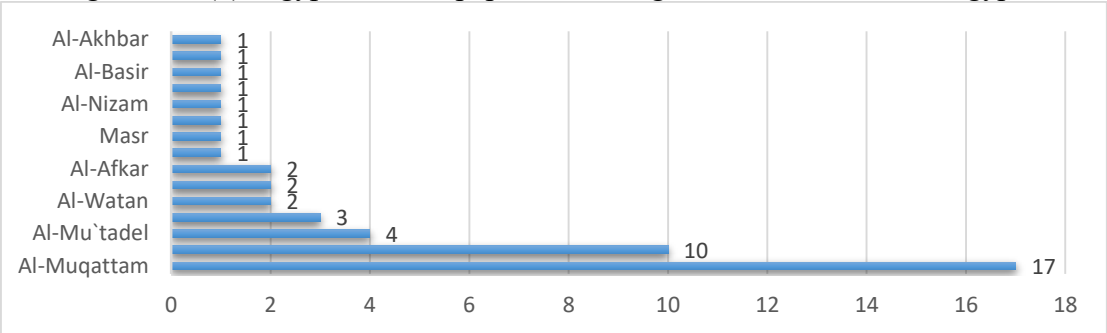
Al-Qibla’s Analysis of Egyptian Press Coverage of the Return of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal in 1923

| No. | Newspaper | Journalistic Material | | | Documentation from Al-Qibla Newspaper (by Issue Number) |
|--------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------|---------------|---|
| | | Article | Telegram | Press Release | |
| 1 | Al-Muqattam | 13 | 4 | 0 | 707/709/710/712/714/715/716/717 |
| 2 | Al-Balagh | 9 | 1 | 0 | 706/707/709/715/718/720 |
| 3 | Al-Mu’tadel | 3 | 0 | 1 | 708/709/716/720 |
| 4 | Al-Siyasa | 3 | 0 | 0 | 714/715 |
| 5 | Al-Nazir | 1 | 0 | 0 | 716 |
| 6 | Al-Mahrousa | 1 | 0 | 0 | 718 |
| 7 | Al-Watan | 1 | 1 | 0 | 706/721 |
| 8 | Wadi Al-Nil | 0 | 1 | 0 | 706 |
| 9 | Al-Umma | 0 | 1 | 0 | 706 |
| 10 | Al-Baseer | 0 | 1 | 0 | 706 |
| 11 | Al-Akhbar | 0 | 1 | 0 | 706 |
| 12 | Al-Afkar | 1 | 1 | 0 | 706/721 |
| 13 | Al-Nizam | 0 | 1 | 0 | 706 |
| 14 | Al-Ahram | 1 | 1 | 0 | 706/713 |
| 15 | Misr | 1 | 1 | 0 | 706 |
| Total | | 33 | 14 | 1 | |

The table’s results indicate that Al-Qibla addressed 48 journalistic materials from 15 Egyptian newspapers that covered the incident of the return of the Mahmal. Among these, articles ranked first, with a total of 33 articles analysing the incident. Telegrams came in second place, totalling 14, while press statements were the least utilized journalistic materials, as these newspapers published only one press statement on the incident. This distribution reflects Al-Qibla’s focus on using articles to shape an Egyptian media discourse that supports the Hijazi position, as articles are considered the most utilized journalistic tools in presenting general viewpoints compared to telegrams and press releases, which perform a more formal and direct media function.

As for the Egyptian newspapers that provided the most extensive coverage of the incident, this is clearly illustrated in the following Figure.

Figure No. (1): Egyptian Newspapers’ Coverage of the Return of the Egyptian Mahmal



Regarding the Egyptian newspapers that covered the incident the most, Al-Muqattam ranked first, with 17 journalistic treatments of the incident. It was followed by Al-Balagh in second place, with 10 journalistic treatments. Meanwhile, the newspapers Al-Nafir, Al-Mahrousa, Wadi Al-Nil, Al-Umma, Al-Baseer, Al-Akhbar, Al-Nizam, and Misr ranked last, each providing only one journalistic treatment. This result shows Al-Qibla’s media discourse’s interest in Egyptian papers that support the Hijazi government, despite Al-Qibla’s declaration of committing to a neutral position when speaking of its strategy in presenting the Egyptian papers’ viewpoints on the incident.

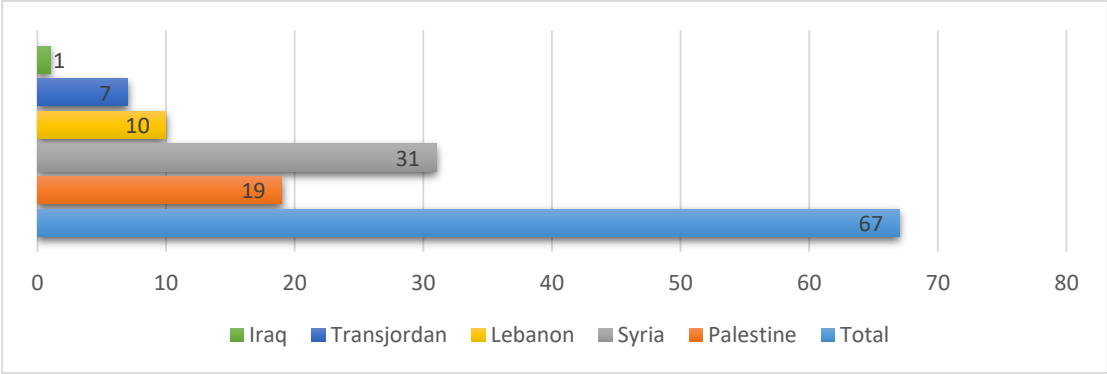
Arab media solidarity and popular reactions to the Mahmal incident

The Coverage of Al-Qibla on the Arab Press Reporting of the Return of the Egyptian Mahmal Incident

Al-Qibla closely followed everything published in the newspapers of the Levant and Iraq regarding the incident of the return of the Egyptian Mahmal. It republished a considerable number of journalistic materials from those newspapers to clarify its supportive stance toward the Hashemite government of Hijaz.

The following Figure illustrates the coverage of those Arab newspapers as published by Al-Qibla newspaper.

Figure 2
The Coverage of Arab Newspapers on the Return of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal Incident



The results of the Figure indicate that the Syrian newspapers provided the most extensive coverage of the return of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal incident, publishing a total of 31 journalistic pieces on the event. Palestinian newspapers ranked second, covering the incident with 19 journalistic pieces, followed by Jordanian newspapers in third place and Lebanese newspapers in fourth. Meanwhile, Iraqi newspapers ranked last, publishing only one piece.

These results reflect how the media discourse leans towards the Syrian, Palestinian, and Jordanian newspapers, which saw Al-Sharif Al-Hussein and his government in the Hijaz as an extension to the renaissance project, which began alongside the Great Arab Revolt. The results also emphasize the newspaper's striving to create an Arabic media front that supports the Hijazi government's legitimacy in the face of the Arabic and Islamic public opinion. This is what's called 'directed neutrality' in journalistic studies, as allied positions are provided with a more influential portion, while opposing positions are presented in an uninfluential manner. It could be said that Al-Qibla's discourse wasn't merely a news carrier, but was a political and journalistic tool aimed at guiding the public's opinion towards supporting the Hijazi government while maintaining an appearance of formal objectivity.

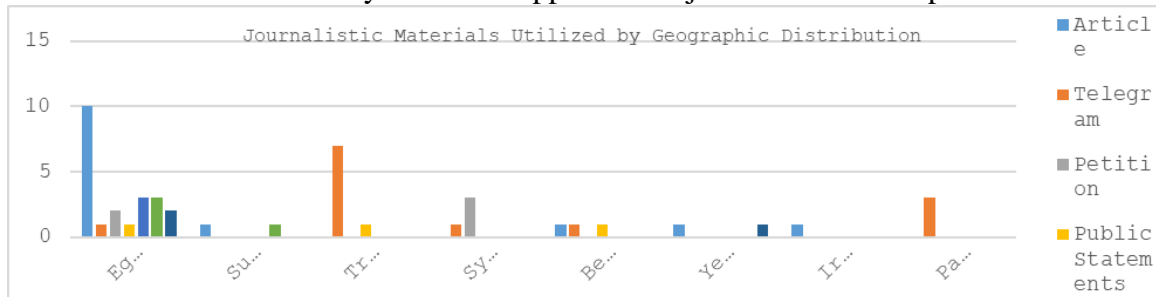
Al-Qibla's analysis of Arab Support for the Hijazi Government's Position on the Incident of the Return of the Egyptian Mahmal

Various segments of Arab society in the Levant, the Nile Valley, Iraq, and Yemen—including citizens and social institutions—closely followed the tensions that arose in the relations between Hijaz and Egypt due to the stance of the Egypt/tian government and some Egyptian newspapers regarding the return of the Egyptian Mahmal.

The following chart illustrates what Arabs published in Al-Qibla newspaper concerning this event.

Figure 3

Journalistic materials sent by Arabs to support the Hijazi Government's position on the incident.



The Figure results show that the focal points of Arab condemnation of the Egyptian government's stance on the incident were concentrated in eight Arab countries: Egypt, Sudan, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Palestine. Egypt ranked first, with a total of 22 press materials expressing its citizens' disapproval of the Egyptian government's stance on the incident. Transjordan's free citizens came in second place with a total of 8 press materials, followed by Syria and Palestine, each with a total of two press materials. Graph No. (3) Illustrates these results.

As for the most utilized press materials (articles, telegrams, petitions, public statements, poems, speeches, and sermons), in expressing Arab condemnation of the Egyptian government's stance on the incident, they amounted to a total of 34 press materials. Articles ranked first with a

total of 13, followed by petitions and poems, each with 5). Telegrams and speeches came next, each with a total of 4. The least utilized form was the sermon, with only one instance.

The findings of this section show that Al-Qibla newspaper in its coverage of the 1923 Egyptian Mahmal return, adopted a media discourse strategy of transmitting external positions rather than having an independent editorial line. This is evident in the 180 news items published in the newspaper, 63.88% of which were sourced from other Arab newspapers (Egyptian, Levantine, Iraqi) and 18.89% from Arab societies. Only 11.11% were from Al-Qibla's own editorial team and 6.11% from official government communications and telegrams from the Hejaz government.

This shows how little the newspaper relies on internal or official sources, so the editorial line prioritizes external views over internal narrative. This is confirmed by the editor in chief, Hasan al-Sabban, who said Al-Qibla prefers to reprint materials from other Arab newspapers or from "free Arabs" to get an objective and balanced view of the events. This can be understood in the concept of "external legitimation," which is discussed in political communication studies where media institutions use external sources to boost their credibility and to support the positions they take.

Findings

This study examined the 1923 incident involving the return of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal through an analysis of official data, telegrams, letters, and articles published in Al-Qibla, the Hijazi newspaper, within issues numbered 704 to 723. The study reached the following conclusions:

1. Al-Qibla's coverage of the Egyptian Hajj Mahmal incident confirmed that the primary reason behind its failure to complete the pilgrimage journey lay in the differing perspectives of the Hijaz and Egyptian governments regarding their objectives. The Hijazi government, upon realizing that the Egyptian government's demands were driven by British colonial ambitions, decided to reject them, asserting its sovereignty and its right to manage its internal affairs without external interference.
2. Al-Qibla emphasized that the dispute between the Hijaz and Egyptian governments in 1923 was administrative in nature. However, Egyptian newspapers transformed it into a religious conflict to incite Islamic public opinion against the King of the Hijaz. In reality, the issue was entirely unrelated to religion, as evidenced by the large number of messages, telegrams, and letters sent by Arabs from the Levant, Iraq, and Yemen, expressing their condemnation of the Egyptian newspapers' stance and rejecting the accusations made against the King of the Hijaz and his government.
3. The study shows Al-Qibla did not just report the return of the Egyptian Mahmal in 1923; it used the event to build a media narrative for the Hejaz government's political views and its authority in Hajj affairs.1. Al-Qibla did not just report the return of the Egyptian Mahmal in 1923; it used the event to build a media narrative for the Hejaz government's political views and its authority in Hajj affairs.
4. Al-Qibla's quantitative content analysis shows that the newspaper was going for an appearance of objectivity. This was done by echoing external views that supported the Hejaz government's policies rather than generating internal editorial content. This is a deliberate and calculated media discourse management to support the Hejaz government and its narrative against the Egyptian official account.

Recommendations

1. More research is needed on Arab press discourse analysis in the 1920s Arab Renaissance as it's a rich source for understanding political and symbolic transformations in the Arab East.

2. Religious rituals—Mahmal procession and Kiswah (Kaaba covering)—should not be seen as mere spiritual practices but as diplomatic and sovereign tools where religious and political interests meet.
3. Historical studies should combine descriptive methods (for interpreting historical narratives) with quantitative methods (digital content analysis). This interdisciplinary approach gives you a deeper understanding of the historical context through descriptive insight and a set of measurable indicators to guide you towards new analytical perspectives.

Endnotes

¹ Due to the significance of this newspaper, which was an established media institution dedicated to promoting the ideology and values of the Arab Renaissance, His Highness Prince Hassan bin Talal ordered, on the occasion of the centenary of the Great Arab Revolt in 2016, the reprinting of all its issues. This project was undertaken by Ward Jordanian Publishing and Distribution House. See :(Al-Qibla, 2016, Editor's Introduction).

² Fu'ad al-Khatib was among the prominent Arab intellectuals and thinkers who significantly contributed to the development of the concept of the Arab Renaissance as articulated by Arab nationalists and later adopted by Sharif Hussein bin Ali. His influential and diverse contributions were particularly evident in the numerous articles he published in Al-Qibla newspaper. For an in-depth examination of Fu'ad al-Khatib's views and ideas as presented in Al-Qibla. (Al-Khatib, 2015).

³ Jamil al-Azm (1873–1933) was a Syrian intellectual and literary figure born in Istanbul and later relocated to Damascus. He was among the pioneers of the reform movement in the early 20th century and founded the Syrian journal Al-Basa'ir. (Al-Zarkali, 2002).

⁴ Refer to Table (1) in this study.

⁵ (Ajzakhana) (Singular: Ajzakhana) is a Persian-origin word meaning a pharmacy. See: (Academy of the Arabic Language, 2005).

⁶ The Egyptian Tekkiyeh (lodging house) is located opposite the Sacred Mosque from the southern side. A superintendent and staff and included rooms, warehouses, a mill, and a kitchen managed it. See: (Bell, 1881, p. 29).

⁷ Regarding the mentioned telegram, documents from the Egyptian Council of Ministers state that the Egyptian government's request to send two medical missions was not unprecedented. The records confirm that a medical clinic was established in the Egyptian Tekkiyeh in Mecca as early as 1340 AH/1922 CE. Based on information provided by Mabrouk Fahmy Pasha (the Egyptian Hajj Amir) about the lack of doctors in the Hijaz and the reliance of Egyptian and other pilgrims on the Egyptian medical mission, the Egyptian government submitted a report to King Fuad for appropriate action. Consequently, the king ordered the establishment of a permanent clinic and pharmacy in the Egyptian Tekkiyeh in Mecca. The Egyptian government then assigned Engineer Hamed Afandi Shaker and a group of craftsmen and workers to travel to Mecca and commence construction. Upon their arrival on March 25, 1923, the Chief Justice of the Hijazi government informed Engineer Hamed Afandi that the request to establish the clinic and pharmacy in the Tekkiyeh was denied. The justification was that the Tekkiyeh's function attracted impoverished pilgrims—particularly Javanese, Indians, and others—who gathered there for food, resulting in unsanitary conditions due to food remnants and waste. According to Sharif Hussein, "its harm outweighs its benefit." However, the Egyptian side interpreted the Hijazi government's rejection of the Egyptian project as an attempt by the Hashemite king to eliminate the Tekkiyeh and sever all Egyptian government ties. See: (Abdelmoula, 2020, (33), pp. 5621–5795).

⁸ According to Egyptian archival sources, after the medical delegation arrived in Jeddah, customs officials informed its members that they were not authorized to bring in their equipment and supplies. The following day, the Hijazi police summoned the two doctors and the Egyptian Hajj delegate, subjecting them to what the documents describe as inappropriate treatment. The investigating officer accused them of distributing pamphlets that insulted the Hijaz government and placed them under police surveillance. In response, the medical delegation members rejected both the interrogation procedures and the charges, emphasizing that they were subjects of King Farouk (r. 1936–1952) and that their presence in Jeddah was for a purely humanitarian mission (Abdelmoula, 2020).

⁹ Editor of Al-Ahram Newspaper: Gabriel Takla was a Lebanese-born journalist who was raised and passed away in Egypt. He managed Al-Ahram from 1912 until 1943. See: (Rizq, 1993, p.31).

¹⁰ This article was published in issue (705) on July 19, 1923. However, the newspaper ceased publication from Dhul-Hijjah 5 to Dhul-Hijjah 16, 1341 AH due to the editorial team and printing staff performing the Hajj pilgrimage. During this hiatus, Egyptian newspapers—particularly Al-Ahram—escalated their campaign against the Hijazi government and its king, Hussein bin Ali, stirring Arab and Islamic public opinion. Upon resuming publication, Al-Qibla launched an extensive media campaign countering the claims made by Egyptian newspapers. It published numerous articles, telegrams, and statements from pilgrims and Arab intellectuals from Syria, Iraq, Transjordan, and particularly Egypt, criticizing Al-Ahram's editorial stance and refuting its allegations by presenting eyewitness accounts of the pilgrimage.

¹¹ For more on the threats posed by Ibn Saud to the Hijaz, see: (Youssef, 2019, Vol. 20, (1), pp. 1–49).

¹² An attempt was made to locate the issues of the Arab newspapers referenced by Al-Qibla. Unfortunately, the 1923 issues of these newspapers were not found, despite the availability of some post-1923 editions in the libraries of the University of Jordan and the Jordanian National Library. However, Feldstein newspaper's 1923 issues were available, allowing for a verification of the accuracy of Al-Qibla's quotations, which supports the objectivity of its editor-in-chief.

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