



The Politicization of Arab Gulf Media Outlets in the Gulf Crisis: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

This research focused on the politicization of specific Gulf media outlets brought on by the current crisis between Qatar and its neighbors. The analysis looked at Al-Jazeera on the Qatari side and Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia on the Saudi/UAE side. 25 total content samples were researched to provide the analysis and conclusion offered by this paper.

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Introduction and Crisis Background

On June 5th, 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt announced they severed ties with Qatar, while several other countries downgraded ties with the peninsula state. Saudi Arabia closed the land border with Qatar, their only land crossing, while ordering all Saudi citizens in Qatar to leave the country and Qatari citizens in Saudi Arabia to leave within 14 days. Bahrain and the U.A.E. issued similar orders to their citizens. The official set of reasons for the severing of ties is, according to official statements by the four countries' foreign ministries, is due to Qatar's meddling in their affairs and attempting to sow instability and undermine their sovereignties, harboring and funding of various terrorist entities including the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda and ISIS, backing Iranian efforts to destabilize the countries and encouraging revolutions, use of the media to cause internal strife, and allegedly cooperating with Houthi militias to compromise the Arab Coalition efforts to support the legitimate government in Yemen [1,2] Qatar was immediately barred from using the airspace and sea routes of the four countries, and was also kicked out of the Arab Coalition fighting in Yemen. Qatar strongly denies the allegations and maintains its regret over the decision to sever ties [1].

Purpose and Methodology

A media war is flaring during the crisis between the two factions and the media systems at play have been at the center of the conflict and have been politicized [3] and weaponized to sway opinion and garner support, both within the GCC and outside as well, and to shape narratives. For this report, we did a content analysis on material from Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia on the Saudi/U.A.E. side and Al-Jazeera Arabic on the Qatari side. The analysis explored 25 samples, articles and broadcast material, from both factions; 16 of those samples from Al-Jazeera and 9

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from Al-Arabiya (5) and Sky News Arabia (4). The sample date range is between March 25, 2017 to November 3, 2017.

According to Dr. Courtney Freer, research officer at the London School of Economics' Middle East Center, the Gulf crisis has had a fundamental effect on the media landscape. Freer explains the effect the crisis has had on media by saying:

"Although one of the root causes of the crisis was the political nature of Al-Jazeera's broadcasts, the crisis has had the effect of politicizing other media outlets. Because showing sympathy for Qatar has been criminalized in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, the only coverage in these states is necessarily one-sided. General lack of trust has led to a pitting of the two sides against each other, leaving little grey area" [3].

This report looks at politicized narratives brought on by the media organizations using a quantitative content analysis of the media outlets' content to demonstrate the difference, brought on by the crisis, and patterns in their reporting on specific topics. The research in this report explores the media systems' post-conflict approach and built-in narratives in reporting on four different areas:

- 1) Difference in pre-crisis and post-crisis reporting on the Yemen conflict by Al-Jazeera
- 2) Reporting on Economy of the Opposing Side
- 3) Human Rights
- 4) Terrorism Accusations.

Al-Jazeera's Shift in Reporting on Yemen

Al-Jazeera's coverage on what is called "Decisive Storm", or the Arab Coalition's operations to restore the UN-recognized government in Yemen, shifted drastically following the Gulf crisis that resulted in the expulsion of Qatar from the Coalition. Before the crisis, Al-Jazeera's reporting framed the conflict and the Arab Coalition's operations in a positive manner and emphasized the danger and violations of the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and Ali Abdullah Saleh, the ousted Yemeni president who is aligned with the Houthis. Following the crisis and Qatar's expulsion from the Coalition, Al-Jazeera's reporting focused on the civilian and humanitarian toll that the Arab Coalition has caused while framing the operations by the Coalition as a failure in achieving their goals, while causing devastation in their efforts. What is also significant in their post-crisis reporting on Yemen is that the Coalition is Saudi-led. Moreover, Al-Jazeera changed terminology by ceasing to use "Arab Coalition" and instead uses "Saudi-led Coalition". An article published by Al-Jazeera on June 5, 2017, hours before diplomatic ties were suddenly severed by the Saudi-led bloc, is titled "Qatar in Yemen... Massive Efforts to Restore Legitimacy and to Reconstruction" [4] emphasizes Qatar's "significant role" in the Coalition's operations on "military, political, and economic" levels. The article lists various contributions by Qatar to the Arab Coalition and its efforts in Yemen. Another pre-crisis piece published March 25, 2017 titled "The Harvest of Two Years of Operation: Save Yemen" [5,6] hails the Coalition as "the first of its kind" in a Pan-Arab context. "The [Arab Coalition] is delivering a knockout blow that breaks the back of the Iranian expansionist program in the Arabian Peninsula," the article said, hailing the Coalition's regional presence and operations. The article criticized the "international community" and the U.N. for not recognizing the Houthis as a terrorist entity. Additionally, the article contained figures of human rights violations by Houthis and civilian death toll they have caused, saying that Houthi and Saleh-forces shelling has caused a majority of the devastation and casualties [5,6]. A post-crisis report broadcast on Al-Jazeera Arabic platforms on September 12, 2017, titled "Human Rights Watch accuses Saudi-led Arab Coalition of Committing War Crimes in Yemen" [6] cited a Human Rights Watch report accusing the Saudi-led Coalition of war crimes in Yemen. The report, unlike previous pre-crisis coverage, cited a UN report calling for the Arab Coalition to be blacklisted for child rights violations. Another post-crisis sample broadcast on Al-Jazeera Arabic on October 12, 2017 titled "After Two Years of the Indecisive Storm in Yemen, is Saudi Arabia's Southern Border Less Secure and Does Saudi Arabia Need to Restore Hope to Itself?" [7] is significant because it reports that the Coalition's efforts have shifted in that the conflict has turned from an offensive operation to capture Sana'a, the capital, to a defensive one in securing Saudi borders from Houthi infiltration. The report, much like Al-Jazeera's post-crisis coverage of the conflict, frames the Yemen conflict as a failure from the Coalition's standpoint. That is even reflected in a clear play of words in the title of the report, as the two operations launched by the Arab Coalition in Yemen are called 'Decisive Storm' and 'Restoring Hope'. Ultimately, the juxtaposition shown

in the samples is summed up in that Al-Jazeera's platforms ran a Coalition-aligned narrative that blasted Houthi rebel and Saleh forces. Moreover, pre-crisis reporting praised Coalition efforts and Qatar's contribution to them. As the Gulf crisis erupted and Qatar was expelled from the Coalition, Al-Jazeera's reporting shifted to frame the Coalition's operations as failing to achieve their goals and devastating to Yemen's infrastructure and civilian population. What is also different in the reporting is the post-crisis reporting of figures indicating deaths caused by Coalition airstrikes, an aspect absent from pre-crisis Al-Jazeera reporting on the conflict in Yemen.

Reporting on the Economy

The rift between the Saudi-led bloc and Qatar intensified the media war in reporting negatively on each other's respective economies. The Saudi/UAE media, Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia, focus their reporting on the economic consequences faced by the Qatari economy. Furthermore, they frame these economic consequences mainly as a result of severing of economic ties and the sanctions placed on Qatar. On the Qatari side, Al-Jazeera framed their reporting around two aspects:

- 1) Refuting reports that indicate damage inflicted on the Qatari economy as a result of sanctions by the Saudi-led bloc, and instead praising fiscal measures adopted that contained the economic damage
- 2) Reporting on economic hardships faced by Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, and their effect on social cohesion (**Appendix**).

Saudi/UAE media

Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia's reporting ran narratives indicating Qatari struggle to deal with the crisis economically. Nearly identical articles published by Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia on October 18 and 19, 2017, titled "Qatar Withdraws \$20 Billion From Sovereign Fund to Save its Economy" [8,9] implies that Qatar's withdrawal of \$20 billion from its foreign sovereign fund was a measure taken to "contain their economic crisis" [9]. Furthermore, the articles suggest that the withdrawal is a clear indicator of a Qatari economy hurt by sanctions imposed on them by the boycotting countries. Another report broadcast by Al-Arabiya on August 30, 2017, titled "Qatar Rallying to Minimize Effect of Negative Rating by Fitch" [10] frames the negative credit rating of Qatar by Fitch Ratings as a result of the sanctions imposed. The report blames the economic consequences to the "Intransigence" of Qatari leaders and that the Fitch rating proves the suffering of the Qatari banking sector and overall Qatari economy as a result of the boycott by the Saudi-led bloc. An October 8, 2017, article published by Al-Arabiya titled "Qatar Orders Aid to Private Sector as Sanctions Hurt Economy" [11] cites Qatari measures to help private sector, by cutting rent in half for companies in logistics zones as one example, as measures directly caused by an "economy hurt by sanctions imposed by other Arab states" [11]. The article also cited the sanctions triggered a withdrawal of Gulf countries' deposits in Qatari banks, causing a slump in real estate prices and a stock market plunge.

Qatari media

Al-Jazeera's reporting in an economic context focused on the narratives that Qatar is successfully weathering the economic storm caused by the sanctions and that Gulf boycotting countries' economies, mainly Saudi Arabia, are facing economic hardships that have social implications.

An article published by Al-Jazeera on November 3, 2017, titled "International Monetary Fund: Qatar is Successfully Mitigating Damages Caused by Gulf Crisis" [12] cites a quote from Jihad Azour, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Director of the Middle East and Central Asia Department, saying that Qatar is successfully minimizing the economic effects of the Gulf crisis by way of adopting "fiscal measures instrumental in easing the burden of the blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt," according to the article. The other narrative of "sounding alarm" over neighboring countries' economies mainly focused on Saudi Arabia. A report broadcast by Al-Jazeera on October 31, 2017 titled "The IMF Sounds the Alarm of Danger... Unprecedented Economic Crisis Threatens Gulf Economies Amid Crisis with Qatar" [13] points to the "dangerous" state of the economies of Gulf States, Qatar not included in the report, and singles out Saudi Arabia and UAE. The report implies the Gulf crisis will increase debts and deficits, causing the implementation of austerity measures that will hurt and dismay citizens. The report also indicated that foreign investors will be turned away and that Dubai risks losing its status as a global financial hub. The report also delved into the costly effects of the Yemeni conflict on the Saudi economy. Finally, the report says, "the short-sightedness of boycotting countries is politically and economically costly," pointing to the negative effects of the crisis on boycotting nations. Another sample, an Al-Jazeera report broadcast on 20 September 2017, titled "Biggest Oil Producer Plans Energy Price Hike by 80%... Exacerbating Burden on Saudi Citizens in Order to Ease Economic Hardships" [14] points to Saudi planned lifting of energy subsidies. The report cites a Guardian article which insinuates lifting subsidies undermines the social contract between the monarchy and its citizens. The report also mentions Saudi borrowing that grew its debt-to-GDP percentage from %1.6 to %15.5 in a year and a half as proof that "dire measures" are taken by the Saudis in attempt to ease economic hardship.

Human Rights

The Gulf Crisis prompted an intensification of reporting on human rights violations committed by both sides of the conflict. The Saudi/UAE media ran narratives that focus mainly on Qatari human rights violations in the areas of collective punishment of its citizens and allegedly funding terrorist groups. The Qatari media, through Al-Jazeera, ran narratives that frame Saudi human rights violations in different areas and UAE human rights violations in contexts of repressive practices such as the curtailing of free speech and the country's prisons inside and outside its borders.

Saudi/UAE media

The Saudi/UAE media frames Qatari human rights violations in the contexts of collective punishments of citizens by stripping

citizenship and displacement, and the alleged funding and support of terrorist entities. An article on Al-Arabiya published September 14, 2017 titled "Human Rights Meetings Reveal Qatari Violations" [15] cites statements during the 36th session of the UN Human Rights Council by a joint-delegation between the Arab Organization on Human Rights in the UK and the Global Campaign to End Qatari Funding for Terrorism that discuss Qatari human rights violations. According to the article, the joint-delegation discussed the most significant human rights violations committed by Qatar "despite lies of Qatari Foreign Minister about the human rights situation in Qatar," [15]. The joint-delegation pointed out that Qatar contributes millions to human rights organization to "beautify its face". The article goes on to quote the joint-delegation about different human rights violations by Qatar, namely the arrests of some Qatari citizens returning from the Islamic pilgrimage in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the pulling of citizenship and displacement of Qatari citizens, mistreatment and discrimination of migrant workers, and Qatari funding of terrorism. In a more issue-focused article on Sky News Arabia published September 13, 2017 titled "Saudi Human Rights Organization: Qatar Committing Collective Punishment by Stripping Citizenships of Al-Marri Tribe" [16] delves into the issue of Qatari stripping of citizenships from its citizens, in this case 54 members of Al-Marri tribe. The article points out to human rights violations in Qatar in the displacement of the tribe and the inclusion of women and children in the punishment. The article, quoting a statement from the Saudi Human Rights Organization, says such measures are unprecedented internationally except in a 2005 case in Qatar where similar action taken against Al-Ghufran family saw the stripping of citizenship and expulsion of 6000 members of the family. Another article by Sky News Arabia published October 18, 2017, titled "Saudi Human Rights Organization Condemns Qatari Human Rights Violations" [17] again mentions collective punishment of Qatari citizens. The Saudi Human Rights statement cited in the article specifically points to the Qatari government's freezing of the bank accounts of two members of the Al-Thani royal family, Shiekh Abdullah bin Ali Al-Thani and Shiekh Sultan bin Suhaim Al-Thani, for publically supporting the Saudi-led bloc and criticizing Qatari government policies. The statement quoted in the article condemns Qatari authorities for "collective punishment that violates human rights."

Qatari media

Al-Jazeera's coverage about human rights in Saudi Arabia and the UAE framed the issue by citing Saudi human rights violation in areas such as religious discrimination, mass arrests, gender inequality, and capital punishment. In the UAE, Al-Jazeera focused its reporting on the country's crackdown on free speech, repressive laws, and treatment of prisoners inside and outside their borders. A report broadcast on September 29, 2017, titled "Washington Post: Decision to Let Women Drive Turning Eyes Away from Saudi Violations of Human Rights" [18] cites a Washington Post opinion piece that discusses the decision to let women drive in Saudi Arabia and puts it in the framework of a "distraction of Saudi violations of human rights in the areas of

women and war crimes committed by the Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen,” as per the broadcast. Another report broadcast on October 12, 2017, cites a testimony by Michael Kozak, senior advisor in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in the State Department, in which he singled out Iran and Saudi Arabia in their “discrimination against non-Muslims and alarming executions” [7]. The rest of the report focuses on Saudi Arabia and the use of discriminatory laws preventing non-Muslims from openly practicing their religions to jail them. The other aspect of Al-Jazeera’s coverage on Saudi and human rights, arresting dissenting voice, is covered in an October 5, 2017 broadcast report titled “After it Included Intellectuals, Media Figures, Activists, and Clerics... Are Arbitrary Arrests the Theme of Popular Change and Reform Policies [in Saudi Arabia]?” [19] discusses the sweeping arrests of dozens of known figures in the Kingdom. The report implies that the arrests are part of an initiative to target and arrest dissenting voices “disguised by the Saudi government as part of reform policies.” The report goes on to point out the arrests are human rights violations according to international human rights organizations that contradict Saudi government commitments about granting freedoms and the “opening up of Saudi society.” Another report broadcast by Al-Jazeera on September 14, 2017, titled “Will Saudi Arabia Militarize and Turn into a Police State? Expanding Arrests Includes Women, Activists, Technocrats, and Royal Family Members” [20] point to the “alarming nature” of arrests of key individuals in Saudi Arabia, claiming many of them may have been arrested because they did not “publically support their government’s campaign against Qatar.” The report goes on to imply that the new leadership in Saudi Arabia is curbing the influence of the religious establishment, whom the monarchy has depended on to bolster its legitimacy. The report closes by likening the recent crackdown to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman shooting himself in the foot. Al-Jazeera’s reporting on human rights violations by the UAE focuses on the narrative that the UAE is complicit in human rights violations that defy its “tolerant” and “happy” image that it portrays on the international stage. A July 11, 2017 article published on Al-Jazeera titled “UAE... Violations Beyond its Borders” [21] attempts to convey a brief recent history of different areas of human rights that the UAE has breached, according to the article. The article opens by saying “Behind its awesome skyscrapers and the ‘happy’ image it presents, the UAE has another face in the areas of rights and freedoms.” The article goes on to quote a Human Rights Watch statement offering criticism of the UAE’s portrayed image of tolerance and acceptance, saying that reality proves otherwise. Mentions of a repressive climate for dissidents are explored in the article, while placing emphasis on laws that make it easy for authorities to arrest people without ample evidence, “[UAE] enacted laws such as the Cyber Crime Law in 2012 and the Counter-terrorism Law in 2014, which has been described by rights groups as being some of the harshest laws in modern times due to the severity of punishments.” The article also explores the “gruesome” treatment of prisoners in the UAE and also in UAE-run prisons in Yemen, Libya, and Eritrea. This article is a summation of the focus of Al-Jazeera on human rights in the UAE, as it is an in-depth piece that tackles the various single human

rights issues it has reported on relating to the UAE and dissects them in one article.

Terrorism

At the heart of the conflict between Qatar and its neighbors is the accusations of Qatar funding terrorism. That accusation of Qatar funding and harboring terrorists is what prompted the four countries of Saudi, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt to sever ties. According to the official statement announcing the severing of ties with Qatar released by the Saudi Foreign Ministry, Qatar is “harboring terrorist and sectarian groups that threaten regional stability, including the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and promoting their literature and plans consistently through its media outlets.” Saudi and UAE media echo that sentiment with their reporting on Qatar and links to terrorism. Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia frame the issue as Qatar being the lead funder of various terrorist groups and activities that threaten the world. These outlets report on the role of Qatar in harboring terrorist groups and funding them. Al-Jazeera’s responding narrative regarding terrorism is that Saudi Arabia plays a central role in supporting terrorism. Al-Jazeera uses testimonials and quotes from various political figures that reflect that narrative to frame the issue as being Saudi is the lead supporter of terrorism.

Saudi/UAE media

Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia’s coverage of terrorism regarding Qatar is reflected by the countries’, Saudi and UAE, official stances on the issue: Qatar is the main supporter of terrorist groups that threaten global security. A July 4, 2017 article published on Sky News Arabia titled “Qatar Abandoning the Heads of Terrorism... Is at the Top of Arab Demands” [22] reports that “turning over designated terrorists that Qatar has sheltered for years and ceasing to fund terrorists is the top demand” of the Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. The article states that four countries issued a list of wanted terrorists that pose a danger on the peace and stability of the four countries, the region, and the world. The articles imply that the list of terrorists wanted in Qatar by the four countries reflects the Qatari “dual policy of the declaring to fight terrorism on the one hand, and financing, supporting and harboring various terrorist organizations on the other.” A report broadcast on Al-Arabiya September 4, 2017 titled “Protesters in Barcelona Denounce Qatari Funding of Terrorism” [23] alleges that a group named ‘Spaniards Against Terrorism’ held a protest featuring people of various European nationalities at the site of the August 17, 2017 terrorist attack in Las Ramblas in Barcelona, that was committed by an “extremist imam linked to Qatar,” according to the report. The report goes on to say protestors denounced the role of Qatar and its Emir in spreading terrorist attacks in Spain and Europe. The reporting from Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia, as the samples suggest, frames Qatar as the core funder of terrorist groups and their activities.

Qatari media

Al-Jazeera’s reporting on terrorism during the crisis revolves mostly around highlighting and pushing the narrative that Saudi Arabia is the lead supporter of terrorism and extremist ideology

to counter the narratives made by the Saudi-led bloc's media. A common, main feature of reporting on that narrative is basing that narrative around the attribution of political figures and entities that convey their dismay about Saudi Arabia and its link with terrorism. A first sample article published September 12, 2017 titled "Iran: Saudi Arabia Funds Terrorism and is Accusing Qatar to Absolve itself" [24] quotes a spokesperson from the Iranian Foreign Ministry in saying that Saudi Arabia, not Qatar, is the main funder of terrorism. Another article dated July 20, 2017 titled "U.S. Congressman Calls on Saudi Arabia to Counter Terrorist Funding" [25] quotes U.S. Congressman Ted Poe in urging Saudi to put more effort to stem funding terrorism and to fight extremist ideology and that Saudi Arabia "plays the arsonist and the firefighter when it comes to Islamist extremism." The same pattern continues in a July 5, 2017 article titled "Report: Saudi Accused of Funding Extremist Groups in the U.K." [26] cites a report published by a U.K. research group pointing to the link between Saudi and funding Islamist extremism. The cited report discloses that "Iran and some Gulf states, most notably Saudi" are responsible for campaigns to "export Wahhabism." A report broadcast on September 22, 2017 titled "Bernie Sanders: Saudi Arabia Supports Terrorism and is not an Ally to the U.S." [27] cites an interview with Bernie Sanders published on the Intercept during which he denounced Saudi Arabia, calling it "undemocratic" and that it "funds extremist ideologies."

Conclusion

This research focused on the politicization of specific Gulf media outlets brought on by the current crisis between Qatar and its neighbors. The analysis looked at Al-Jazeera on the Qatari side and Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia on the Saudi/UAE side. 25 total content samples were researched to provide the analysis and conclusion offered by this paper. The analysis shows a focus on four specific areas of reporting that have been politicized as a direct result of the conflict. These areas are:

- 1) Terrorism accusations
- 2) Reporting on the economy
- 3) Human rights
- 4) Al-Jazeera's pre and post conflict reporting on Yemen.

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- 10 Al-Arabiya (2017) Qatar Rallying to Minimize Effect of Negative Rating by Fitch [Television broadcast].

In reporting on terrorism, Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia reflect the official stance of their countries on Qatar: Qatar is the main supporter of terrorist groups and individuals that threaten regional and global security. Al-Jazeera's reporting in a terrorism context focuses mostly on highlighting the narrative that Saudi Arabia is the lead supporter of terrorism and extremist ideology to counter the narratives made by the Saudi-led bloc's media.

In reporting on their economies, Al-Arabiya and Sky News Arabia highlight the economic downturn faced by Qatar framed as a result of the sanctions placed by the Saudi-led bloc. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera's reporting on the economy framed it in two narratives: 1) Qatar is successfully mitigating economic consequences 2) The boycotting Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, are facing economic hardships that have social implications and potential disruptions. In human rights, the Saudi/UAE media focused on Qatari human rights violations in the areas of funding terrorism and violations against their own citizens, specifically in the area of pulling citizenships from its own people. Al-Jazeera focused on general Saudi human rights violations in different areas, while reporting on UAE human rights violations specifically in the areas of crackdown on dissidents and focusing on the conditions of UAE prisons inside and outside its borders.

In the context of the Yemen conflict, Al-Jazeera's reporting shifted drastically as a result of the Gulf crisis, which expelled Qatar from the Arab Coalition in the Yemen conflict. Pre-crisis reporting framed the conflict and the Coalition's missions positively while providing negative coverage of the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and ousted Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the faction that the Arab Coalition is fighting. Following the eruption of the Gulf crisis and Qatar's expulsion from the Arab Coalition, Al-Jazeera's reporting shifted to framing the conflict as a failure, from the Coalition's standpoint, and as a humanitarian disaster exacerbated by the Coalition.

Finally, conducting a content analysis was done to quantitatively gauge the politicization of the media outlets in the countries involved in the Gulf crisis. The research done on the samples in this paper display that politicization on reporting directly caused by the Gulf crisis, the issues that caused the crisis, and the issues caused by the crisis.

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