COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Do MENA countries practice digital diplomacy? An analysis of their embassies' websites in Spain

Abstract

This research carries out an analysis of the websites published by MENA countries' embassies with a presence in Spain, in order to understand whether they practice digital diplomacy. Such activity is a low-cost, wide-ranging public diplomacy tool. The analysis covers a two-year period (2020-2022) that coincides with the Covid-19 pandemic, a context that prompted the digitization of many sectors. The article contributes to the literature on Arab and Israeli digital diplomacy, as well as on digital diplomacy as practiced by embassies. Specifically, this exploratory analysis examines the webpages and published press notes of four countries' embassies, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, Morocco, and Qatar. These countries were chosen because they have the most robust websites in Spanish, together with the fact that they were the MENA countries whose governments pioneered the use of Twitter as an instrument of digital diplomacy. The article examines the topics and interpretations provided by the press notes published on these embassies' websites. A discourse analysis methodology with references to the original sources is applied. Topics and interpretations are classified into four types of public diplomacy: media diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, niche diplomacy and nation branding. The conclusion is that the MENA countries studied neglect digital diplomacy on their websites in Spain, missing out on the opportunities it represents. The apparently four most digitized embassies in this group have errors on their webpages and often only publish messages from their respective foreign ministries, focusing on regional and internal issues rather than on their bilateral relationship with Spain. This is especially true of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Keywords
Public Diplomacy, digital diplomacy, MENA, Arab countries, Israel, embassies, webpages.

1. Introduction

Digital diplomacy can be considered as a low-cost, wide-ranging public diplomacy tool. In order to find out if the MENA countries implement this public diplomacy tool through their embassies, this article explores the websites of their embassies in Spain, analyzing more carefully those of four countries: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Morocco and Qatar. March 2020-March 2022 is chosen as the study period: two years that coincide with the Covid-19 pandemic, a context that prompted the digitization of many sectors.

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First, the article reviews the academic literature on Arab and Israeli digital diplomacy. The methodology justifies the sample selection and data collection: press notes available on the websites of the four apparently most digitized embassies of the MENA countries. The analysis consists of identifying topics and interpretations, grouping them into four types of public diplomacy and exposing the results accompanied by references to the original sources. The results are presented country by country. Finally, the conclusions derived from the research carried out are exposed.

1.1. *Arab and Israeli public and digital diplomacy*

Public diplomacy is "an international political communication activity to which States and other organizations resort in order to achieve political objectives abroad and to establish positive relations with foreign publics" (Azpíroz, 2013, p. 176). Digital diplomacy, which refers to the use of the Internet and digital technologies to achieve diplomatic objectives, has become increasingly important in the toolbox of public diplomacy in the 21st century. As Yarchi *et al.* (2017) explain, the Internet freed us from dependence on "gatekeepers" such as journalists and editors, as well as allowed for unmediated public diplomacy and more direct interaction with foreign audiences, attracting the attention of governments and foreign ministries as the new nucleus of public diplomacy efforts. Nations and their diplomats had to adopt new strategies and began to use online tools to remain relevant in the digital age (Archetti, 2012; Bátora & Neumann, 2002). Although many digital diplomacy studies deal with action undertaken by state actors (e.g., Archetti, 2012; Cull, 2013; Hayden, 2013; Khatib, Duttbon & Thelwall, 2012), others examine digital diplomacy initiatives from the citizenry (Yarchi *et al.*, 2017). There are also articles focusing specifically to digital diplomacy exercised by embassies of the United States (Găzdoiu, 2015); the European Union (Collins & Bekenova, 2019); a group of Western embassies (2020); Greece (Miliopoulou & Papaioannou, 2020); Iran (Wang & Yellinek, 2022) and Pakistan (Habibullah, 2022). Next, literature on public and digital diplomacy exercised by Arab countries and Israel is reviewed.

In the case of Arab public diplomacy, several authors coincide on denouncing that, in order to promote a good image abroad, most Middle Eastern countries engage in international public relations campaigns carried out by foreign firms, rather than in their own public diplomacy activities (Ndove, 2009; Al-Yasin & Dashti, 2008; Albritton & Manheim, 1984; Burnham, 2013).

Other authors share the view that Arab public diplomacy is carried out in an outdated and reactive way. Abd El-wahed (2016) focuses on Egyptian public diplomacy. He reveals that the main communication strategies have to do with media relations and adopting reactive approaches to counter negative media coverage of the country in foreign media. Abdalla (2017) discusses public relations and communication in public diplomacy on the part of Libyan institutions in Egypt and the UK following the 2011 Libyan revolution. He concludes that Libyan public relations practice has not embraced the new concept of public diplomacy in its communication efforts, but rather has adopted the old and narrow concept of public diplomacy, i.e., giving information to the public mainly through the advertising model.

Al Jazeera and *Al Arabiya* are the aim of study of Barakat (2011), who compares the media coverage of *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* during the Arab Spring, finding them reflective of the foreign policy proper to their sponsoring countries, Qatar and Saudi Arabia respectively. Barakat affirms that social networks were complementary tools for these satellite television channels. Abd and Zaynab (2017) also focus on *Al Jazeera*, highlighting its success as a pan-Arab public diplomacy tool, given its popularity, credibility, critical coverage, and relative independence from Qatari politics. But they point out that, after the Arab springs, the Qatari television channel degenerated into a propaganda agent, serving Qatar's politics and agenda. This was seen in *Al Jazeera*'s "double standard coverage" of the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria.

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A few authors do address the role played by Arab embassies in public diplomacy. Research from Curtin and Gaither (2004), although not framed as public diplomacy, addressed the inability of Arab government websites written in English to influence international audiences since they failed to follow Western media criteria in their use of articulating norms, news values, and language. Dawoud (2006) speaks of developing an Arab public diplomacy strategy, pointing out that such a strategy is lacking in these countries in order to transmit local culture and interests to the rest of the world's citizens and leaders. One of its recommendations ties in with this article's object of analysis, namely that each Arab embassy abroad should have its own website to give users easy access to information. Khakimova (2013) suggests that engaging in public diplomacy at Arab embassies and creating a positive relationship with the American public is an uphill battle. This conclusion was drawn after interviewing employees from 20 Arab embassies in the United States. These embassies predominantly focus on media relations and reflect an outdated public diplomacy structure, seeking to influence, rather than engage in, two-way dialogue.

The literature on Israeli public diplomacy is more abundant than in the case of Arab countries, covering various aspects of that country's activity. There are articles on media diplomacy (Mor, 2014; White, 2022) and cultural diplomacy (Podoler, 2014; Goren, 2020). Articles on the Israel brand stand out (Avraham, 2009; Goodman, 2017; Hadari & Turgeman, 2018; Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi, 2019). Several explain that Israel seeks to stand out as a country of start-ups and sports technology (Dubinsky & Dzikus, 2019; Dubinsky 2021, 2022). Other articles talk about digital and citizen diplomacy (Aouragh, 2016; Yarchi *et al.*, 2017; Samuel-Azran *et al.*, 2019; Goodman & Shaw, 2022), highlighting the problem of the "image of Goliath" from which Israel suffers and its attempts to downplay that image.

In summary, although in the Israeli case literature on digital diplomacy is abundant, in the Arab case only three publications pay attention to it: either considering it as a complement to the role played by traditional media (Barakat, 2011); criticizing the inability of Arabic government websites written in English to influence international audiences (Curtin & Gaither, 2004); or recommending that each Arab embassy have its own website to give users easy access to information (Dawoud, 2006).

Considering the relevance and relative novelty of digital diplomacy, and that the academic literature on Arab public diplomacy is rather scarce, this article aims to contribute to the study of digital diplomacy as practiced by Arab countries and Israel, as well as to the emerging literature on digital diplomacy as practiced by embassies. The analysis of the websites published by MENA countries' embassies with a presence in Spain will help to understand whether and how they practice digital diplomacy.

2. Methodology

2.1. *Sample selection*

For this analysis, we first explored the websites of MENA country embassies with a presence in Spain. The MENA countries are located in the geographical region of the Middle East and North Africa with majority Arab and Muslim populations. Although there is debate regarding its composition (Sestafe Silvestre, 2019; IstiZada, 2020), with 19 to 27 countries depending on the analysis, 19 countries were selected for this analysis. To determine whether these countries carry out public diplomacy activities in Spain, we first checked existing information on the websites of their embassies (see the list in Annex 1).

Of the 19 countries on the list, only Bahrain lacks a physical embassy in Spain (it carries out its diplomatic activities with Spain through its embassy in France). Of the remaining 18, the embassies of Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait and Tunisia in Spain do not have a website. Instead, we found links to the State Information Service (Egyptian State Information Service/SIS), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Iraq) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Migration (Tunisia).

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Of note, in the case of Egypt, the website is entirely in Spanish, which shows a desire to make its information known to a Spanish-speaking audience, but not necessarily a Spaniard one. The website of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in Arabic, but it has a button to translate it into English. It can also be translated into Spanish with the automatic translation service offered by browsers such as Google Chrome. The Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Migration's website is available in Arabic, English and French. The Diplomatic Mission of Palestine in Spain has a website, but when consulting it, it produced an error (see Annex 1). Thus, 13 MENA countries with an embassy in Spain have a proper website.

Of these 13 countries, we examined which of them present information entirely in Spanish. Although embassies provide important services to their populations living or traveling abroad (and thus publish their websites in their native language, in this case Arabic or Hebrew), the purpose of this article is to verify how embassies exercise digital public diplomacy, and how they address foreign public opinion, in this case the Spanish one. For this reason, we considered offering their webpages and information in Spanish a sign of effort and quality. The results can be found below:

- Countries whose embassy in Spain has a website in Spanish (8): Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Iran, Israel, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar.
- Countries whose embassy in Spain has a website, but only in Arabic (1): Syria.
- Special cases (4): United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen.

The webpage of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is in Spanish (mixed with English), but it appears to be under construction since most sections are blank. With activation of the browser's automatic translation to English, the contents can be viewed (see Annex 1). The case of Jordan is similar; its embassy's webpage is also in Spanish and, in fact, its graphic design is very similar to that of the UAE's website. But, again, when accessing the page, it seems to be under construction. The default language is English, although there are headlines in Spanish. If automatic translation to Spanish is activated, the page continues to appear under construction (see Annex 1). Lebanon's website mixes information in Spanish, English and Arabic on its website. It has a Spanish translation button, but, even when activating it, the headlines appear in Spanish and the contents in English (see Annex 1). The website of the Embassy of Yemen is very basic and made with the Blogger program; it mixes Spanish, Arabic and English. Presumably it is under construction, like those of the UAE and Jordan. Each time we visited the website, it activates the computer's antivirus program (see Annex 1).

These results give us an idea of the MENA countries that are interested in and can actually reach Spanish public opinion through digital public diplomacy. Ultimately, of the 19 MENA countries with an embassy in Spain, only 8 have a functional website in Spanish.

Regarding social networks, in the field of politics, Twitter is clearly and widely preferred. Just as only 8 embassies of the 19 MENA countries had a website in Spanish, only 8 had Twitter accounts, although the list of each did not entirely coincide.

- Countries whose embassy in Spain has a website in Spanish (8): Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Iran, Israel, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar.
- Countries whose embassy in Spain has a Twitter account (8): Saudi Arabia (2014), Israel (2010), Jordan (2020), Lebanon (not operational), Morocco (2019), Palestine (2020), Qatar (2015), Tunisia (2020), Yemen (2021).

Of note regarding these Twitter accounts, the embassies of several countries link to the social networks of their Ministry of Foreign Affairs instead of managing their own accounts, which would give them more autonomy and allow them to focus more on the local (Spanish) audience. This occurs in the cases of Algeria, Egypt (which links to the social networks of the State Information Site), UAE, Iran and Iraq. The Tunisian Embassy has its own Twitter account, but it links to the Facebook and Instagram accounts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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In conclusion, only the embassies of four countries have a functional website in Spanish and their own Twitter account, namely Saudi Arabia, Israel, Morocco and Qatar. In addition, among the MENA countries, these four embassies in Spain were the first to create Twitter accounts, which indicates greater commitment to digital diplomacy[1]. Thus, we will analyze these four countries' implementation of digital diplomacy in Spain in more detail; our analysis will cover the period March 2020-March 2022.

2.2. *Data collection*

Our analysis will cover the period March 2020-March 2022: a period that coincides with the Covid-19 pandemic, a context that prompted the digitalization of many sectors. We will focus just on the embassies' websites and their press releases. Having an embassy Twitter account was part of the country selection criteria because it is an indicator of the embassy's commitment to digital diplomacy. However, we will not analyze Twitter accounts because in order to read Twitter messages people must have a Twitter account. On the contrary, everyone can access the embassies' website. Therefore, we will explore the embassies' websites and we will perform a discourse analysis of their press releases during the period of study.

2.3. *Categories of analysis*

A discourse analysis of press releases allows us to analyze public diplomacy both reflected and exercised on webpages. Each country's press releases sample is presented in a document where each press release includes an assigned reference number assigned and a link to the original source. Later, for each press release, topics and interpretations are identified and classified according to the type of public diplomacy in which they best fit: media diplomacy (informative and persuasive messages on issues of political relevance and/or current affairs), cultural diplomacy (educational and cultural activities), niche diplomacy (international cooperation, activities and discourse that aims to stand out in a specific niche/aspect) and country branding (activities to promote and "sell" the country to foreigners)[2]. The exposition of results is accompanied by parentheses with the reference numbers previously assigned to press releases. This way statements can be verified by the reader (see each country's sample in OSF).

3. Results: Saudi Arabia

The webpage of the embassy of Saudi Arabia in Spain is by default in English, but its news section is in Spanish. The homepage includes a link and box of updates to the official Twitter account of the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Spain, which has been active since November 2014.

At the bottom, the page includes the logo of the Media and Communication Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, as well as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" logo. Links to the social networks Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram lead to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official accounts. The news section includes news in Spanish published starting in December 2017. During the study period, 7 news items were found.

3.1. *Media diplomacy*

Three news pieces report on the arrival of a new Saudi Arabian ambassador to Spain (1, 2, 3). Only these publications specifically address the Saudi Arabia-Spain relationship. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, shortly after assuming his post, the new ambassador visited the ambassadors of Palestine, the UAE, Iraq, Oman, Kuwait, Morocco, Jordan and Lebanon in Spain. This demonstrates a friendly relationship between the Arab countries, which also

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[1] The embassies of Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen would fall into this group if they were to update their webpages.
[2] To delve into this classification of public diplomacy activities, see Azpíroz (2015).

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coordinate and collaborate within the framework of the Council of Arab Ambassadors and the Gulf Cooperation Council group in Madrid[3].

Another news piece addresses the launch of an initiative to solve the crisis in Yemen (5). That piece is in English, which reflects little interest in reaching specifically a Spanish-speaking audience (this could be linked to the fact that the Yemen crisis is a controversial topic). The piece explains that Saudi Arabia has announced an initiative that includes a United Nations-supervised ceasefire in order to end the Yemeni crisis and reach a political solution. Furthermore, the note states that Saudi Arabia has the right to defend its land, citizens and residents from systematic attacks carried out by the Iranian-backed Houthi militia, whose actions also target the center of the global economy and its suppliers, as well as global energy security.

3.2. *Cultural diplomacy*

One of the pieces published discusses the Prince Faisal Prize for sports research (4).

3.3. *Niche diplomacy*

Two pieces mention the "Green Saudi Arabia" and "Green Middle East" initiatives (6, 7), which are framed within the "Vision 2030"[4]. The "Green Saudi Arabia" initiative is a national initiative that seeks to improve the quality of life for future generations, with objectives such as the proliferation of green areas, reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, the fight against pollution and land degradation, and conservation of marine life. For this, sub-initiatives are included, such as planting 10,000 million trees in the country, reducing carbon dioxide emissions to no more than 4% of global emissions, and a renewable energy plan to increase the production of clean energy in Saudi Arabia by 50% by the year 2030. The "Green Middle East" initiative is of a regional nature, to be carried out together with the States of the Gulf Cooperation Council and other countries of the Middle East. It seeks cooperation on opportunities to finance sustainable development initiatives in low-income countries and exchange experiences related to the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.

4. Results: Israel

The website of the Embassy of Israel in Spain is in Spanish and includes links to its social networks on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Instagram (all in Spanish). It also has a section of recommended articles and audios. On it, one can subscribe to the embassy's monthly newsletter, although the archive only contains information up to summer 2020 (and the most recent file cannot be opened).

The news section includes articles in Spanish starting in March 2006. The study period contains a total of 50 articles: 35 are located properly on the news section and 15 are located on the subsection "Israel's ambassador in the media." There are 12 articles that have to do with the bilateral relationship with Spain, and 10 of them are included in the subsection on Ambassador Rodica Radian-Gordon. These notes speak of anti-Semitism, activities related to cultural diplomacy and niche diplomacy.

4.1. *Media diplomacy*

Several notes report on Netanyahu's speech regarding Israel's peace treaty with the UAE and Bahrain (8, 12, 14, 15, 19, 20). The Israeli leader talks about how the new relationship will benefit both parties, explains that Israel's relationship with many Arab countries has improved, that the agreement is one more step towards peace, and thanks Trump for bringing it about. He

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[3] However, and due to the Gulf Cooperation Council crisis that lasted from June 2017 to January 2021, the new Saudi Arabian ambassador did not visit the ambassador of Qatar in Spain.

[4] Saudi "Vision 2030" seeks to grow the Saudi private sector, to establish a prosperous economy through diversification, reducing the country's dependence on oil and to develop public services sectors, including tourism. See: https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/overview/

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states that the Israeli position against Iran's attempt to obtain nuclear weapons made a positive impression on some Arab leaders in the region, defying the convention that no Arab country would accept peace with Israel before the Palestinian-Israel conflict comes to an end. Netanyahu highlights that reconciliation between Israel and the Arab world is likely to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace. And that there is a significant change that, for the first time, Israel will receive investments from the Middle East (12). The October 2020 trilateral meeting between Israel, the UAE and the United States in Israel represents the first official visit by UAE leaders to Israel. During the signing ceremony of the "Abraham Accords" between Israel and the UAE/Bahrain, Netanyahu thanked Trump for his position against Iran, and the UAE and Bahrain for the peace agreement reached (15).

Five notes (29, 30, 31, 32, 33) speak to the International Criminal Court's (ICC) February 5, 2021, ruling regarding Israel[5]. Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi argues that the decision distorts international law, turns the ICC into a political tool of anti-Israeli propaganda and rewards Palestinian terrorism, as well as the Palestinian Authority's refusal to return to direct negotiations with Israel. Furthermore, he claims that the ICC does not have jurisdiction to deliberate on the Palestinian case (29, 33). Netanyahu claims that investigating Israel for bogus war crimes amounts to anti-Semitism, while the ICC refuses to investigate brutal dictatorships like those in Iran and Syria (30, 32). The Israeli foreign ministry rejects the ICC's decision, stating that Israel is not a member of the ICC and has not consented to its jurisdiction. Only sovereign states can delegate their jurisdiction to the Court, and there is not and never has been a Palestinian state. In addition, he calls on all States that value the international legal system and seek to protect it from politicization to oppose this decision and not cooperate with it (31). In an interview with the ambassador, (49) she responds to a question related to peace negotiations with the Palestinians saying that, most importantly, Palestinians must decide that they want to negotiate with Israel. She reminds us that, because of the Abraham Accords (50), Israel has, for the first time, regular and significant relations with Arab countries. She further points to the positive atmosphere created, which Palestinians can join.

Two press releases (3, 11) address Israel's conflict with Hezbollah, noting that Iran is attempting to gain a military foothold in Israel from Lebanese territory, and any attack against Israel will be met with force. Two other notes deal with the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran (PAIC) and the reestablishment of economic sanctions against that country ("snapback" mechanism) (9, 10, 16, 19). Netanyahu congratulates the United States for the decision and explains that Israel has always opposed the agreement because Iran never really gave up its pursuit of nuclear weapons. He mentions that Middle Eastern countries oppose such an agreement, stressing that Israelis and Arabs agree on Iran (9). Another note highlights Ashkenazi's gratitude to the United States for preventing the UN Security Council from lifting the arms embargo on Iran (10). Asked about Iran and its nuclear program, the Israeli ambassador to Spain affirms that it is very important to send the message that Iran is a destabilizing force in the region (49, 50), both as a nuclear threat and because of the regional role it plays (through proxy forces like Hezbollah) (50).

Regarding anti-Semitism in Europe and Spain, in an interview, the ambassador emphasizes that knowing history is important so as not to repeat it (36). Later (50), she claims

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[5] The decision affirms that the ICC has jurisdiction over the actions of the Israeli army and Palestinian militias (Hamas, Islamic Jihad) in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel (the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem), which paves the way for the prosecution of war crimes investigation by the high court. The court clarified that its decision was not a ruling on the Palestinian "state", but that, as a state party to the court, the ruling should be treated in line with a UN General Assembly declaration on the "right of the Palestinian people to self-determination." See: https://www.dw.com/es/corte-penal-internacional-dice-que-tiene-jurisdicci%C3%B3n-en-territorios-palestinos/a-56477262; and https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-02-05/la-justicia-de-la-haya-se-declara-competente-para-investigar-crimenes-de-guerra-en-palestina.html

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that it exists as a phenomenon and is sometimes disguised as legitimate criticism of Israel (50). In the case of Spain, she notes, "the fact that for so many centuries there have been no Jews in Spain means that there are cases of anti-Semitism without Jews." Thus, the importance of Spain's membership in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. In another interview (50), the ambassador responds to a question regarding the independence movement in Catalonia and the supposed support for it from a part of Israel. She replies that Israel very clearly sees it as an internal Spanish issue and will not interfere.

4.2. *Cultural diplomacy*

The website offers information on Israeli scholarships and books, as well as a section inviting testimonials about visits to Israel. It also has an "Agenda" section that provides information on Israeli cultural events (concerts, cinema, book presentations, etc.) in a variety of Spanish cities[6].

One of the notes reports that Honduras will open its embassy in Jerusalem (17). The same note reports that the Honduran president was a graduate of the Israeli *Mashav* leadership program. This is an example of the long-term effects of cultural diplomacy.

Of note as well is the educational project "The Muses and the Stars," organized by the public secondary school IES Las Musas and the Ministry of Education, both in Madrid, and promoted by the Israeli Embassy in Spain (34). In this project, students manufacture and launch nanosatellites and carry out environmental studies using satellite images. The ambassador mentions this project and takes the opportunity to talk about Israeli support for female scientists (she herself is a biologist) (49).

Another initiative relates to the Yom Haatzmaut raffle, which, on the occasion of the State of Israel's 73rd Independence Day, gives away a dinner in an Israeli restaurant, an IsraeliBox with various products and a collection of cosmetic products. Participants are instructed to upload on Twitter or Facebook a photo connected to Israel with the hashtag #Israel (35).

4.3. *Niche diplomacy*

The website includes information on the headquarters of the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet leIsrael-KKL) in Spain, although a link to it results in an error.[7] The Jewish National Fund is a foundation created in 1901 to purchase and develop land in Palestine; it originally sought to transform that land from a dry place into a green region. It currently cooperates with other countries to promote initiatives related to water, agriculture, food and green energy[8].

In July 2020, the ambassador toured Andalusia, resulting in various news items in regional Spanish newspapers (the embassy includes links to these news items) (37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44). Cooperation agreements arose from this tour, especially in Granada with talk of generating synergies on scientific and cultural matters (41, 42, 43, 44). An interview with the ambassador mentions Israeli-Murcian water treatment cooperation. She affirms that companies from the two countries have a mutual interest in cooperation, especially regarding matters of innovation, development, and health (49). She argues that both economies are compatible and Israeli companies can help fulfill niche needs that exist.

4.4. *Nation branding*

In the note "Tel Aviv-Jerusalem is the 6th innovative ecosystem," (1) Israel is identified with a specific (economic) aura. The note explains that the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem startup ecosystem ranked sixth globally in the Global Emerging Ecosystems Report for 2020 (by Startup

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[6] https://embassies.gov.il/madrid/NewsAndEvents/calendar-of-events/Pages/Event.aspx
[7] https://embassies.gov.il/madrid/Relations/Pages/Keren-Kayemet-leIsrael-(KKL)-en-Espa%C3%B1a.aspx
[8] https://kkl.mx/quienes-somos/

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Genome). Israeli companies are reported to excel in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI) research, big data, and analytics.

5. Results: Morocco

Of the four countries analyzed, Morocco has the closest relationship with Spain. It has as many as 12 consulates in Spain to serve the large Moroccan population residing there[9].

The embassy website is entirely in Spanish. It includes sections on the embassy and the ambassador, information about Morocco, the bilateral relations with Spain, events in Morocco and Spain, investing in Morocco, travel to Morocco, the consulates, and the activities and speeches of the Moroccan king. It also includes sections that report on the country's views on relevant issues; they are entitled "Constitution," "Moroccan Sahara," "regionalization," "human rights," "the condition of women" and "human development."

For the analysis period, 11 notes were found. But, as in the case of Israel, there is a specific section dedicated to the ambassador's activities (Karima Benyaich) and the notes include more information related to Spain: in the study period there are 13 notes. Due to the diplomatic crisis between Spain and Morocco in the study period, the ambassador was absent from Spain for 10 months (May 2021-March 2022), so coverage of her activities is of little more than one year.

The notes total 24, of which 16 deal with the bilateral relationship with Spain. They deal with bilateral cooperation, cultural diplomacy activities, the repatriation of Moroccans during the coronavirus crisis and the bilateral migration crisis that occurred in 2021.

5.1. *Media diplomacy*

The situation in the Western Sahara is an important issue for Morocco and its bilateral relations with Spain[10]. In November 2020, the Moroccan ambassador to Spain sent a strong message in the wake of acts of vandalism and violence against the Moroccan consulate in Valencia (21). She condemned in the strongest terms the acts instigated by the Polisario Front and criminals [*sic*] who removed the Moroccan flag from the consulate and hung another one. The ambassador insists that the instigators of these acts, which occurred after Polisario representatives called on their supporters to demonstrate in front of all Moroccan representations in Europe, are mafia-related outlaws. Benyaich also reiterates the embassy and consulates' permanent mobilization toward defending Morocco's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

On May 31, 2021, the embassy website published a statement in response to remarks from the Spanish president (5). It states that Sánchez's comment rejecting the Moroccan declaration by linking it to migration is a surprise since no Moroccan declaration has ever mentioned the migration issue[11]. The Moroccan note also states: "Morocco has repeatedly insisted that the

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[9] Moroccans constitute the largest foreign community residing in Spain (776,223 in 2022). See:
https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/472512/poblacion-extranjera-de-espana-por-nacionalidad/

[10] The Western Sahara conflict (called Moroccan Sahara by Morocco) is a dispute over this territory, which was a Spanish colony from 1884 to 1975, when Spain withdrew. It was then annexed by Morocco with the so-called Green March. In 1976, the Polisario Front declared the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), currently recognized by 80 countries, but considered by the UN as a non-autonomous territory. Mauritania abandoned its territorial claims on the area in 1979 and Algeria supports the Polisario Front (in Tindouf, Algeria, there is a large refugee camp with between 100,000 and 200,000 Sahrawis). In 1991, the Polisario Front (a terrorist independence group that wants Western Sahara's independence from Morocco) and Morocco signed a truce negotiated through the UN that put an end to the violence between them and planned to hold a referendum in order to determine the status of Western Sahara. But the referendum never took place. The Polisario wants a self-determination referendum, while Morocco offers a measure of autonomy to the region, a proposal that is gaining acceptance among international actors. See: https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-55350989

[11] The diplomatic crisis between Morocco and Spain began on April 18, 2021, after the Polisario chief, Brahim Ghali, secretly went to and used a false identity at a hospital in Logroño, in order to be treated for coronavirus. See: https://www.larazon.es/espana/20210531/dzk4dopbbzd2vfm65n2ehba73m.html

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bilateral crisis is not linked to the migration issue. The genesis and real reasons for the crisis are already well known, mainly in Spanish public opinion. The issue of migration should not be used as a pretext to divert attention from the real causes of the bilateral crisis" (5).

Subsequently, another note states that the resolution adopted by the European Parliament (EP) on June 10, 2021[12] does not change the political nature of the bilateral crisis between Morocco and Spain (6). In the resolution, the EP criticizes the Moroccan authorities' use of minors in the migration crisis in Ceuta, stating that, "Whatever the objectives that may be behind the situation created in Ceuta," the incident is not in in line with Morocco–Spain–EU cooperation and trust in terms of migration. In this regard, in its note, the Moroccan statement criticizes the "instrumentalization of the EP" and highlights Morocco's work in migratory cooperation (6).

On October 29, 2021, the Moroccan Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita, gave a press conference (8) after the UN Security Council's adoption of resolution 2602 on the Moroccan Sahara[13]. He affirms that Morocco is pleased with it, thanks the United States and France for their support of the Autonomy Initiative as a framework for the resolution of the dispute, and recalls the Security Council's confirmation that the round tables are the only mechanism for managing the negotiation process. He calls on Algeria to participate responsibly and constructively. Morocco, for its part, is committed to maintaining the ceasefire (8). On March 18, 2022, the embassy published a statement, saying that Morocco greatly appreciates Spain's positive positions on and constructive commitments to the question of the Moroccan Sahara contained in a message from the Spanish president to the Moroccan king[14].

5.2. *Cultural diplomacy*

The embassy website has a specific section for Moroccan students in Spain; it addresses the management and renewal of scholarships and returning to Spain during the pandemic (3). It also publishes information about an education and leisure event for children of the Moroccan community in Spain during the summer of 2022, organized by the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Living Abroad (11).

5.3. *Niche diplomacy*

One note reports that, in September 2020, the ambassador met with the president of the Foreign Affairs Commission in the Spanish Parliament to discuss bilateral, regional and international issues (17). A month later, she met with the mayor of Madrid to strengthen decentralized cooperation. Benyaich discussed Morocco's progress over the last two decades, highlighting different stages of advanced regionalization, strengthening the role of territorial collectivities, and changes to the organization of certain Moroccan metropolises. She proposed forging a partnership between Rabat and Madrid to further consolidate their common will to strengthen decentralized cooperation, exchanging experiences in terms of digitalization of administrative procedures and through practical activities of a cultural and socio-educational nature (18). In October 2020, Benyaich met with the President of the Spanish Senate to discuss the consolidation of inter-parliamentary relations between Morocco and Spain (19). In April 2021, Benyaich met with the new Spanish Secretary of State

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[12] See the resolution at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0289_ES.pdf

[13] https://minurso.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/res_26022021_minurso_e.pdf

[14] In March 2022, the Spanish President Pedro Sánchez sent a letter to the Moroccan King Mohammed VI stating that the Moroccan plan for the Sahara is a "serious basis" for the conflict. Spain abandoned its traditional neutral stance. This decision aligned the Spanish government with the US position and confronted opposition from Unidas Podemos, IU and Coalición Canaria. In Spanish public opinion there was concern about possible reprisals that Algeria could adopt in this regard, considering the context of the gas crisis in Europe due to the war in Ukraine and that Algeria is Spain's main supplier. https://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2022/03/18/economia/1647631981_716947.html / https://www.lainformacion.com/economia-negocios-y-finanzas/moncloa-fia-todo-acuerdo-gas-argelia-ordago-marruecos/2862679/

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for Migration (24). Both spoke of migratory cooperation and circular migration, regarding which Benyaich highlighted the importance of expanding it to other sectors such as health and hospitality.

The ambassador addressed the issue of gender when she participated in a conference organized by IE Business School. She affirmed that the king places the gender approach at the center of his priorities for the consolidation of the rule of law, giving rise to the emancipation and empowerment of women. She also recalls reforms undertaken by Morocco in the consolidation of women's rights, including reform of the Family Code, the Nationality Code and the Labor Code, and advances in the 2011 Constitution (16). The ambassador again addressed this issue by participating in the 4th International Conference on Women and Diplomacy (22).

5.4. *Nation branding*

In November 2020, Benyaich participated in the 42nd plenary session of the members affiliated with the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) held in Madrid (20). She explains that her country recently launched a sustainable and inclusive tourism development strategy, seeking to promote partnerships between the public and private sectors. In April 2021, Benyaich met in Madrid with the UNWTO Secretary-General, Zurab Pololikashvili, who describes Morocco as a "continental tourism locomotive" and praises the tourism infrastructure and the quality of the country's tourism reception (23).

6. Results: Qatar

Like the websites of the other embassies, the website of the Embassy of Qatar in Spain includes a section on the embassy itself, another on the country of Qatar (with a special section entitled "World Cup 2022"), another on Spain, a section for news and events[15] and one for consular services. Also, like the other pages, it includes a summary of the latest tweets from the embassy.

Its news section has been present since October 10, 2017, just a few months after the start of the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and other Muslim countries, including members of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, United Arab Emirates). This crisis forced Qatar to be more assertive and to strengthen its diplomatic ties with many countries. The study period includes a total of 67 articles, of which only 3 are framed in the Qatar-Spain bilateral relationship (3, 54, 46). These three include a note reporting a telephone call between the foreign ministers, a note reporting on the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Qatar Business Association (QBA) and the Confederation of Businesses and Industries of Spain (CEOE), and an interview from the Spanish sports newspaper *Marca* with the Qatari ambassador in Spain about the organization of the 2022 World Cup.

The embassy publishes translated official statements, excerpts from press conferences and interviews with the Qatari foreign minister and the Deputy Director of Media Affairs of the Government of Qatar Communications Office in media outlets such as *Le Monde*, *Al Sharq* (Qatari), *Le Figaro, Fox News, Al Araby TV, MSNBC* and *Marca*.

6.1. *Media diplomacy*

6.1.1. The crisis with the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC)

The crisis in the Gulf Cooperation Council[16] is commented on in 14 notes (5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, 18, 44, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 66). In June 2020 (5), the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin

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[15] The section "Events" is empty.

[16] The Gulf crisis began in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt broke diplomatic relations with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism. In addition, Qatar had refused to comply with demands from the Gulf Cooperation Council that included closing *Al Jazeera* television and chilling relations with

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AbdulRahman Al Thani, explained that the Gulf crisis began with a propaganda campaign to discredit Qatar, that the blockade was illegal from the start, that the case is in the International Court of Justice and the International Civil Aviation Organization, and that Qatar hopes to recover its airspace. In January 2021, the Al-Ula Declaration (Gulf Reconciliation Agreement) (51) was issued; it indicates that citizens of the GCC have high hopes that the agreement reached during the summit will restore joint action and strengthen the bonds of friendship and brotherhood among the peoples of the region. Al Thani (52) suggest that the steps after the agreement represent a return to pre-crisis normalcy by all parties, and that it is a success for all.

6.1.2. The Palestinian issue

Qatar makes its position on the Palestinian issue clear, as seen in 8 different notes (5, 20, 26, 29, 34, 36, 44, 66). Qatar is against Israel's possible annexation of part of the West Bank (5). It reaffirms its support of the Palestinian people's rights, and adheres to international legitimacy, the Security Council's relevant resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative as the bases for achieving a just and sustainable peace that guarantees the establishment of a Palestinian State with the 1967 borders and its capital in Jerusalem (20, 29). In October 2021 (66), the Qatari foreign minister declared that the Abraham Accords are incompatible with Qatar's foreign policy, and that Qatar will not develop ties with Israel without a fair solution to the problem of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

6.2. *Niche diplomacy*

6.2.1. Qatar as a country that fights against terrorism

In June 2020 (1), after the ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition against ISIS, Qatar reaffirmed its commitment to work against terrorism. On June 5, 2021 (58), the Government Communications Office responded to accusations from *The Times* newspaper. Qatar considers that the published article, which makes serious and baseless accusations against Qatar, is based on misleading allegations, factual inaccuracies and prejudices[17]. The author, Andrew Norfolk, is alleged to have a documented history of promoting Islamophobia. Instead, the note suggests that Qatar has laws to combat and prevent the financing of terrorism and has been recognized as an international leader for these efforts; it has championed some of the toughest laws to combat money laundering and it will continue to work with the UK and other international partners to fight global terrorism.

6.2.2. Qatar as a mediating country: Afghanistan and Iran

In September 2020 (30), the Afghan Peace Negotiations were launched in Doha. Al Thani states that history has shown time and time again that the use of military force can never resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. It can only be resolved by adopting an immediate and permanent ceasefire and paving the way for constructive dialogue through negotiations toward achieving comprehensive political settlement across all spectrums of Afghanistan. Qatar would continue to play its role as an impartial and reliable international mediator to establish stability in the region. Subsequently (64), the Qatari foreign minister affirmed that Qatar does not have any influence over the Taliban and is a neutral mediator between the different parties. In October 2021 (66), he highlighted the importance of engaging and participating with the party that governs Afghanistan, noting that not communicating with Afghanistan could be a mistake. He explains that Qatar recognizes the state and not the Afghan government,

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Iran. The crisis ended in January 2021 when the embargo on Qatar, which included the closure of sea, land and air borders between Qatar and said countries, ended. https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-55531676

[17] See the article "Qatar funnelled millions of dollars to Nusra front terrorists in Syria" at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/qatar-funnelled-millions-of-dollars-to-nusra-front-terrorists-in-syria-x5rnbsr3l

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emphasizing that as long as there are a country and an Afghan people, then Qatar's commitment to it remains, regardless of who leads the government.

Qatar calls for dialogue and diplomacy between the GCC and Iran (44, 52). The Qatari foreign minister declares that relations between Qatar and Iran have not changed for a long time, that Iran is part of the region and that communicating with it is important for the GCC (66). He adds that it is encouraging to see positive momentum in the talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and that Qatar hopes for regional stability since Iran is a neighboring country, making it necessary to resolve differences through negotiation and not just confrontation. On the West's nuclear deal with Iran, he notes that Qatar and the countries in the region have an interest in seeing the deal reestablished to spare the region further trouble.

6.3. *Nation branding*

When the two-year countdown to the 2022 Qatar World Cup began, the Qatari ambassador to Spain, Abdalla Al Hamar, granted an interview to the sports newspaper *Marca* (46). He says that, during the World Cup, fans will be able to easily travel thanks to huge infrastructure investments made in the country.

Controversy over labor abuses in the country has been prominent in the coverage of the 2022 World Cup. In April 2021 (55), a note explained that calls to boycott the 2022 World Cup were based on misleading media reports, ignoring the progress that Qatar has made in reforming its labor legislation and promoting the rights of migrant workers. The Kafala system[18] was dismantled, a mandatory minimum wage was implemented, and outdoor work was regulated. The Qatari Embassy in Spain had previously reported on improvements to Qatar's labor legislation (5, 22, 41).

7. Conclusions and discussion

It comes as a surprise that, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, only a few MENA countries allocate sufficient resources to digital public diplomacy, especially given the context of the pandemic, its low cost and its scope compared to other types of public diplomacy activities.

The website of the Saudi Arabian Embassy shows no interest in involving a Spaniard audience. Only three notes have to do with its bilateral relationship related to the arrival of a new ambassador. This is probably due to the fact that the bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Spain are not very intense. The fact that most press notes are in Spanish is likely part of the Saudi Foreign Ministry's strategy to reach a wider Spanish-speaking audience, beyond just Spaniards.

The Israeli Embassy has the most complete and functional website. It reflects Israel's involvement in various types of public diplomacy in Spain. One can see interest in offering the Israeli view on regional and global issues. Bilateral relations are largely addressed with coverage of the ambassador's activities, in which she grants various interviews and gives her view on issues such as Palestine, Iran or anti-Semitism. Israel has greater experience and interest in the practice of public diplomacy than its Arabs neighbors, maybe because it has been trying to improve its image abroad for a long time. In addition, the bilateral relationship is relevant given the historical ties of the Jewish community with Spain.

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[18] The Kafala system is a sponsorship arrangement found in Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf countries; it gives citizens and private companies almost absolute control over the employment and immigration status of foreign workers. Under this system, workers cannot enter the country or obtain a visa unless they are sponsored, and they cannot change jobs or leave the country without permission from their employer. On August 30, 2020, with the adoption of Law 19 of 2020, the Kafala sponsorship system in Qatar was dismantled. See:
https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-58438104#:~:text=La%20palabra%20%C3%A1rabe%20kafala%20significa,ser%20deportado%22%2C%20explic%C3%B3%20Romanos

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Morocco has the closest relationship with Spain and, in the period of analysis, also had the most conflictive relationship among the four countries. Reception of the Polisario Front leader to undergo medical treatment in Spain and the 2021 migration crisis in Ceuta provoked a diplomatic crisis between the countries, causing the Moroccan ambassador to leave Spain for several months. Even so, this analysis reveals existing bilateral cooperation at the national and regional levels. Morocco also reveals its interest in positioning itself as a country that is improving on gender issues and as a significant player in the tourism sector.

Analysis of the Embassy of Qatar's website reveals that it is not at all interested in its bilateral relationship with Spain. Only three notes, out of a total of 67, have to do with Spain. As in the case of Saudi Arabia, this may be due to the fact that the bilateral relationship between Qatar and Spain is not very close. In October 2017, just a few months after the start of the conflict between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors and Qatar, the embassy starts publishing many long press releases explaining the country's positions on regional and global issues, as well as comments on preparation for the 2022 World Cup. Conflict with its neighbors seemed to be favorably resolved in January 2021. Qatar responds to criticism of the country's labor laws and accusations of supporting terrorists by explaining the legislative changes introduced and presenting itself as a mediator in places like Afghanistan or Iran. All press releases are published in Spanish, showing the aim to reach a broad Spanish (not just Spaniard) audience, in a context of crisis that forced Qatar to be more assertive at the international level.

In conclusion, the embassies of the MENA countries studied neglect digital diplomacy on their websites in Spain, missing out on the opportunities it represents. This goes in line with previous literature on Arab digital diplomacy. Even the apparently four most digitized embassies of the MENA countries have errors on their webpages. In large part, they only publish messages from their respective foreign ministries that focus on regional and internal issues, aiming to reach an international Spanish–speaking audience. This is especially true of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whose bilateral relationship with Spain is less intense than that of Israel and Morocco.

Graphic 1: Embassies' press releases.
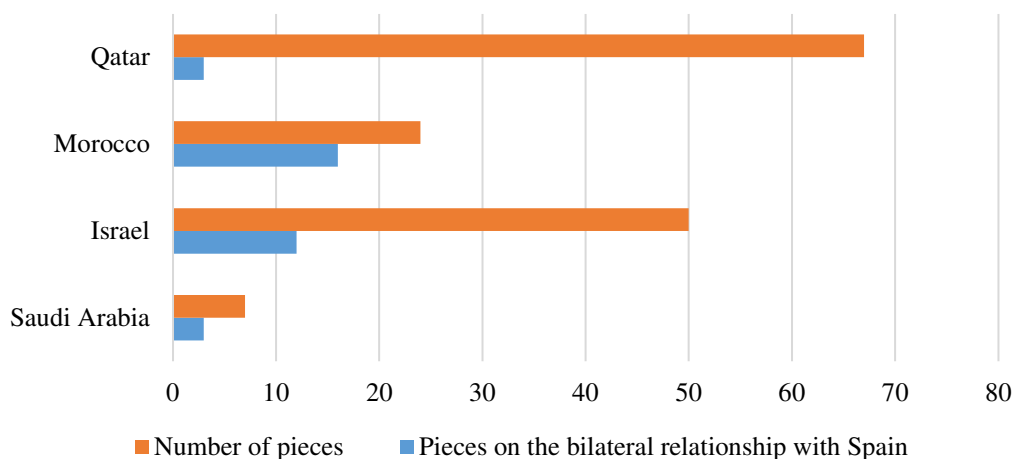
Source: Own elaboration.

This research contributes to the literature on Arab and Israeli digital diplomacy, as well as on digital diplomacy as practiced by embassies. Future lines of study on digital diplomacy could include other MENA countries and focus also on Twitter diplomacy as practiced by the embassies.

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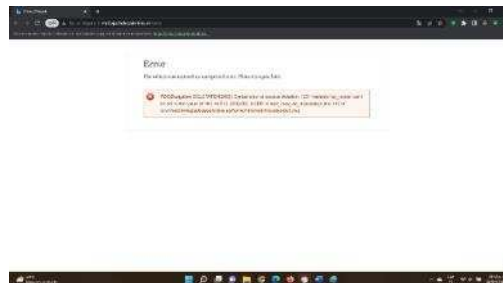**An analysis of their embassies' websites in Spain**

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Annex 1. List of embassies' websites and websites screenshots

*Saudi Arabia: https://embassies.mofa.gov.sa/sites/Spain/en/Pages/default.aspx
*Algeria: http://www.emb-argelia.es/
*Bahrain: It does not have an embassy in Spain.
*Egypt: https://www.sis.gov.eg/?lang=es-ES. This is not the embassy's website proper, but rather the State Information Site, which is translated into Spanish.
*United Arab Emirates: https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/es-es/missions/madrid
*Iran: https://madrid.mfa.ir/es
*Iraq: https://mofa.gov.iq/. This is not the embassy's website, but rather the website of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs
*Israel: https://embassies.gov.il/madrid/Pages/default.aspx
*Jordan: https://mfa.gov.jo/es/embassy/Madrid
*Kuwait: Embassy website not found
*Lebanon: http://madrid.mfa.gov.lb/spain/spanish/home
*Libya: http://www.embajadadelibia.com/
*Morocco: http://www.embajada-marruecos.es/
*Oman: http://www.embajadaomanspain.es/
*Palestine: http://www.embajadadepalestina.es/web/
They have a diplomatic mission, but the website produces an error.
*Qatar: https://madrid.embassy.qa/es
*Syria: http://www.mofaex.gov.sy/madrid-embassy/
*Tunisia: https://www.diplomatie.gov.tn/en/nc/
*Yemen: http://www.embyemenesp.com/

Figure 1: Error message, Diplomatic Mission of Palestine in Spain.
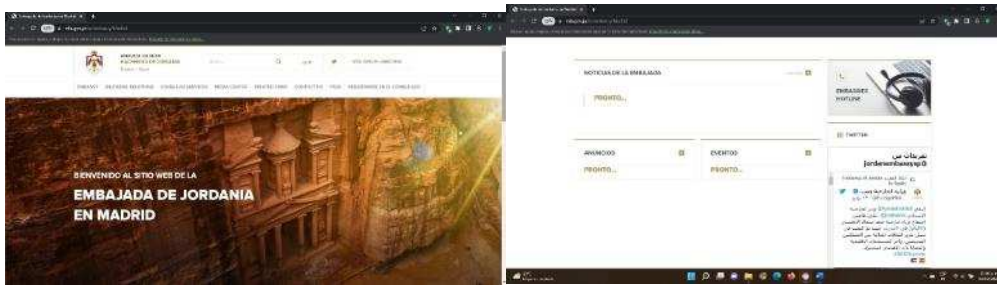

Source: Diplomatic Mission of Palestine in Spain.

Figure 2: Website of the Embassy of UAE in Spain.
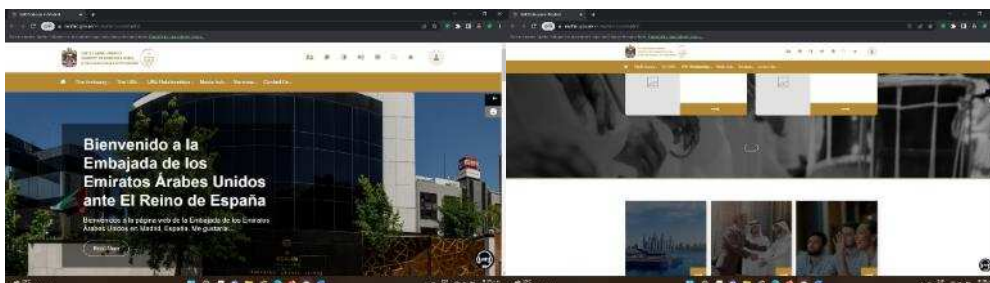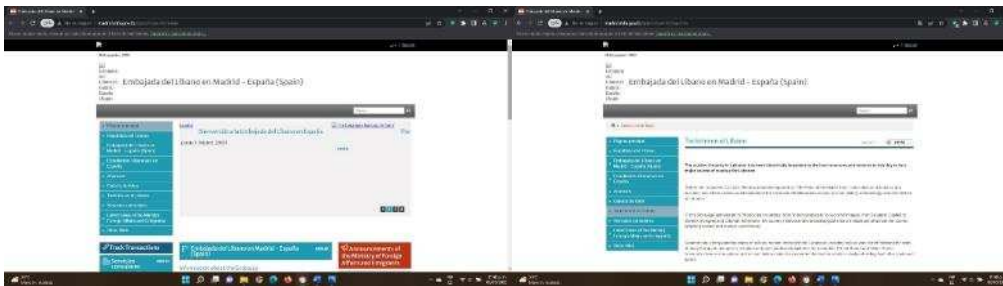

Source: UAE Embassy in Spain.

Azpíroz, M.-L.
Do MENA countries practice digital diplomacy?
An analysis of their embassies' websites in Spain

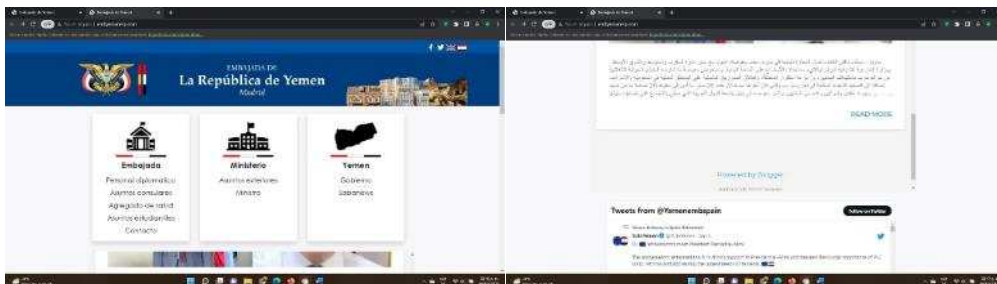**Figure 3**: Website of the Embassy of Jordan in Spain

Source: Jordanian Embassy in Spain.

Figure 4: Website of the Embassy of Lebanon in Spain

Source: Website of the Embassy of Lebanon in Spain.

Figure 5: Website of the Embassy of Yemen in Spain

Source: Embassy of Yemen in Spain.
All screenshots were taken on September 8, 2022, as recorded in the images themselves.