

The mental image of the staff of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States regarding the European Union's foreign policy on Arab issues: A survey study

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Abstract:

A mental image is a complex construct of perceptions and understandings formed in the mind of an individual or group regarding a specific subject. It transcends mere knowledge or superficial impressions, encompassing psychological structures that influence how reality is interpreted and interacted with. Therefore, our current study aims to reveal the mental image formed by employees of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States regarding the European Union's foreign policy towards Arab issues, and to understand their subjective impressions of it, particularly given that the research population consists of individuals with diplomatic and political interests in Arab society. The research aims to: uncover the sources that shape the mental image of the General Secretariat employees of the League of Arab States regarding the European Union's foreign policy. The research was conducted on employees working in the International Political Affairs sector at the headquarters of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States, using a comprehensive sample comprised of the following departments:

- Department of Africa and Arab-African Cooperation.
- Department of American Affairs, Department of Europe and Arab-European Cooperation.
- Department of Asia, Australia and Arab-Asian Cooperation.
- Department of International Organizations.
- Department of Arms Control and Disarmament.

The study, which included a comprehensive sample of 60 respondents from all departments within the university, was conducted with the guidance of a scientific expert*. The research yielded several findings, including: The results showed that the respondents' mental image is primarily shaped within a professional and institutional framework, where direct experience and official reports play a decisive role, while the importance of indirect sources diminishes. This indicates that real-world, formal interaction with relevant parties is more influential than indirect exposure to information.

- The study also highlights the crucial importance of direct professional experience and institutional interaction with the European Union in shaping the respondents' mental image. It is clear that direct practical interaction is the most influential factor compared to indirect sources, thus reinforcing the role of real-world experience in forming and solidifying impressions.

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- The study results indicate that the mental image of the European Union among the respondents is characterized by a clear duality, as it is viewed positively in the areas of cooperation and development, while this positivity declines when evaluating its positions on sensitive Arab issues, indicating a gap between its developmental role and perceptions of neutrality and justice in its policies.

Keywords: Image Perception, Staff Perceptions, Attitudes toward Foreign Policy, Public Opinion, Organizational Perception, League of Arab States, Arab League Secretariat

Introduction:

A mental image is a complex construct of perceptions and understandings formed in the mind of an individual or group regarding a specific subject. It transcends mere knowledge or superficial impressions, encompassing psychological structures that influence how reality is interpreted and interacted with. Similarly, a mental image represents a cognitive framework assembled through multidimensional interactions between information gleaned from the environment, personal experiences, and cultural and individual beliefs. This dynamic process moves between conscious and unconscious perception, making the mental image more influential on behavior than mere known data or objective facts. (1) According to Professor Laura Smith, "A mental image is the cognitive framework that an individual constructs in their mind about a particular idea, entity, or institution. It is a dynamic framework that changes with the experiences and media messages received, and it plays a fundamental role in decision-making and social attitudes." (2) Over the past decade, Middle Eastern countries, including Arab states, have experienced a series of issues and crises. It is essential to study these issues and understand the positions of international and regional organizations, such as the European Union, and the roles of major Arab organizations, such as the League of Arab States.

Second: Methodological Framework:

- Research Problem:

In the field of communication and media, the mental image emerges as one of the structural pillars that determine the behavior of individuals and societies in responding to different messages and situations. This image is formed in the mind of the recipient as a result of integrating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements. Recent research confirms that cognitive processes are not spontaneous but rather the result of complex interactions between external stimuli and internal interpretations influenced by the environment, culture, and personal experience.

At the same time, the role of the Cognitive-Affective-Conative Model stands out as an integrated approach to monitoring how mental images are built in their multiplicity and gradation, as it indicates that the cognitive construction of information precedes and arouses emotional

responses, which is followed by the tendency towards a certain behavior or the making of a specific decision.

Therefore, our current study reveals the mental image formed by the employees of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States regarding the foreign policy of the European Union towards Arab issues and knowing their subjective impressions of it, especially since the research community consists of figures with diplomatic and political interest in Arab society.

Research Questions:

- What are the sources that shape the mental image of the European Union's foreign policy regarding Arab issues among the study sample?
- What is the study sample's assessment of the European Union's foreign policy towards Arab issues?
- What communication methods and techniques might shape the mental image of the European Union's foreign policy among the study sample?
- What type of mental image does the study sample have of the European Union's foreign policy regarding Arab issues?

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Research Objectives: -

- To identify the sources that shape the mental image of the European Union's foreign policy towards Arab issues among employees of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States.
- To identify the communication methods and techniques through which the research sample may form a mental image of the European Union's foreign policy.

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- To identify the mental image formed by employees of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States regarding the European Union's foreign policy towards Arab issues.

- The importance of the study:

The importance lies in the well-studied scientific steps taken through a study of the research variables by conducting a sound, systematic scientific study through which we try to reach the greatest amount of information regarding the mental image that the study sample draws about the formation of the mental image among the employees of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States regarding the foreign policy of the European Union towards Arab issues, and thus record it for researchers as it contributes to increasing the knowledge base by opening new scientific horizons and increasing the academic aspect with information and enriching the scientific library with the intention that researchers in the same field may benefit from it.

Practical Significance:

This research aims to provide clear insights into the European Union's foreign policy towards Arab issues to a distinguished group of individuals interested in political and diplomatic affairs across the Arab world. It is also intended for use at the local level by members of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Foreign Relations Committee of the Iraqi Parliament, and students of media and political science.

Methodology of the study:

This research is a descriptive survey study, which is a comprehensive cross-sectional study, and an organized attempt to collect data, analyze, interpret and report on the current situation of a subject in a specific environment and time. It is also known as research in which all members of the research population or a large sample of them are surveyed.

Research Procedures: A- Research Population and Sample:

A comprehensive census of employees working in the International Political Affairs sector at the headquarters of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States was used. This census included employees from the following departments:

- Department of Africa and Arab-African Cooperation
- Department of American Affairs, Department of Europe and Arab-European Cooperation
- Department of Asia, Australia, and Arab-Asian Cooperation
- Department of International Organizations
- Department of Arms Control and Disarmament. The sample, which included 60 respondents, was a comprehensive census of all departments. These respondents are specialists in the aforementioned departments within the League's work, and the selection was made with the advice of a scientific expert.*

- Research tools:

The researcher has built the form, which includes a number of diverse questions and scales according to the research objectives and its problem. The form includes a number of axes, each of which includes a set of variables that were revealed and dealt with, and it exposes the audience to the research topic.

Validity and Reliability: A- Face Validity:

The questionnaire on the mental image of the staff of the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States regarding the European Union's foreign policy related to Arab issues was presented to media experts for their opinions on the suitability of the questionnaire for the research objectives. The questionnaire was modified, deleted, and added according to their opinions until it reached its final form, and it received the approval of the experts by a percentage of (80%) or more. Therefore, this percentage was adopted as a criterion for the validity of the questions of the questionnaire.

Reliability:

The reliability of the statements in the questionnaire on the mental image of the employees of the International Political Affairs Sector at the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States regarding the European Union's foreign policy related to Arab issues was calculated using Cronbach's alpha method, and the reliability value was (0.992), which is an indication that the reliability coefficient has a high degree of statistically reliable reliability and serves the research objectives.

Previous Studies:

- 1- **Baqir Musa Jassim:** International Public Relations Strategies in Building the Mental Image of Foreign Policy (The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a Model). This study indicates the use of international public relations strategies in building the mental image of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The researcher applied the study to a sample of 65 employees at the ministry headquarters. The study concluded that the ministry relies on a set of strategies, including persuasion strategies, to build a mental image of the ministry.

First: Theoretical Framework of the Research:

1- Scientific Models for Understanding Mental Images

The Cognitive-Affective-Behavioral Model: The Cognitive-Affective-Behavioral Model is considered one of the leading theoretical frameworks that explain how mental images are formed and interact in the human mind. It was founded in 1993 in the United States by the American marketing and tourism behavior expert William C. Gartner. He presented this model as a hierarchical approach that explains the formation of mental images from three main dimensions: the cognitive dimension, which relates to perceptions and beliefs; the affective dimension, which includes feelings and emotions; and finally, the behavioral dimension, or intentions, which are reflected in actions. This model is a development of the classic research dating back to 1956 by the economist Kenneth E. Boulding, who saw that an image consists of our knowledge, thoughts, and feelings about a subject.

Fourth: The Establishment of the League of Arab States

It is the oldest international organization established after World War II. It was formed on March 22, 1945, a few months before the United Nations. Initially, it comprised seven Arab states that enjoyed political independence, including Arab countries in both Asia and Africa. Its charter stipulates coordination among member states in economic, political, and social affairs, including trade relations, communications, cultural relations, nationality, travel documents and permits, social relations, and health.

The permanent headquarters of the League of Arab States is located in Cairo. It serves as a forum for coordinating the political positions of member states and for deliberating and discussing matters of common concern. This is emphasized in the preamble to the charter, which states that the League was established to strengthen the close relations and numerous ties between Arab states.

And in order to support and strengthen these ties on the basis of respect for the independence and sovereignty of those states, and to direct their efforts towards what is best for all Arab countries, their well-being, securing their future, and fulfilling their aspirations and hopes, and in response to Arab public opinion in all Arab countries (as also confirmed by Article (8) of the Charter, which stipulates that each member state of the League shall respect the existing system of government in the other member states, and consider it a right of those states, and undertakes not to take any action aimed at changing that system therein, and this is within the competencies of the League.

- To preserve the independence of member states.
- To cooperate in economic, cultural, social, health, and other affairs.
- To consider the affairs and interests of Arab countries.
- To liberate non-independent Arab countries.

- To cooperate with international organizations to ensure security and peace and to regulate economic and social relations.

A. Main Objectives

- Coordination: Coordinating policies among member states on common issues.
- Cooperation: Enhancing cooperation in economic (trade, communications), cultural, social, and health fields.

5. The European Union

The European Union (EU) is a supranational political and economic union comprising 27 member states, primarily located in Europe. The total area of the EU is 4,233,255 square kilometers. Regarding its stance on Arab issues, the EU's objectives within its borders are: promoting peace, its values, and the well-being of its citizens; providing freedom, security, and justice without internal borders; and taking appropriate measures at its external borders to regulate asylum and migration and to prevent and combat crime.

A. Objectives:

The objectives of the European Union within its borders are as follows:

- To promote peace, its values, and the well-being of its citizens
- To provide freedom, security, and justice without internal borders, while taking appropriate measures at its external borders to regulate asylum and migration and to prevent and combat crime
- To establish an internal market

Results of the field study

Table (1) shows the distribution of respondents by gender:

Gender	Repetition	Percentage
Male	10	16.67%
Female	50	83.33%
Total	60	100%

The table data indicates that the number of females was (50) out of the total respondents, representing (83.33%), while the number of males was only (10) individuals, representing (16.67%) of the total sample of (60) individuals. This reflects a clear dominance of females in the sample compared to males, and the results of the preceding table demonstrate a significant imbalance in the gender distribution within the sample, with females representing a substantially larger percentage.

Table (2) shows the distribution of respondents according to age group.

Age	Repetition	Percentage	Rank
Under 30 years	10	16.67%	Second place
30-40 years	10	16.67%	Second place
41-50 years	10	16.67%	First place
Over 50 years	30	50%	Second place
Total	60	100%	-

The data indicates that the age group (over 50 years) accounted for the largest number of respondents, with a frequency of (30) and a percentage of (50%), to occupy the first place. In contrast, the rest of the age groups, which are (less than 30 years), (30-40 years), and (41-50 years), were distributed equally, as each group obtained a frequency of (10) and a percentage of (16.67%), to all of them come in second place.

Table (3) shows the distribution of the respondents according to the number of years of experience.

Years of Experience	Repetition	Percentage	Rank
Less than 5 years	10	16.67%	
5-10 years	-	-	Second
11-15 years	10	16.67%	-

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More than 15 years	40	66.66%	Second
Total	60	100%	First

The data indicates that the category with over 15 years of experience was the largest, comprising 40 respondents (66.66% of the total sample). The categories with less than 5 years of experience and 11–15 years of experience were the second largest, each with 10 respondents (16.67%). Notably, the 5–10 years of experience category was not represented in the sample.

Table (4) shows the languages spoken by the sample members. (More than one option can be selected)

Languages	Repetition	Percentage	Rank
Arabic	50	83.33%	
English	50	83.33%	First
French	20	33.33%	First
Chinese	-	-	Second
Russian	10	16.67%	-
Total	130	100%	Third

The results indicate that Arabic and English ranked first, each with a frequency of (50) and a percentage of (83.33%). French came in second place with a frequency of (20) and a percentage of (33.33%).

Table (5) shows the sources of mental image formation. (More than one alternative can be selected)

No	Sources for shaping public image:	Repetitions	Percentage	Rank
1.	Official work reports	50	11.63%	First
2.	Arab media	30	6.98%	Third
3.	European media	30	6.98%	Third
4.	Conferences and seminars	30	6.98%	Third
5.	Direct professional experience	50	11.63%	First
6.	Social media posts	30	6.98%	Third
7.	Visits to EU countries	30	6.98%	Third
8.	Delegations and conferences	40	9.30%	Second
9.	Direct contact with European figures	30	6.98%	Third
10.	Work colleagues	10	2.33%	Fourth
11.	Friends of foreign nationalities	30	6.98%	Third
12.	University publications	10	2.33%	Fourth
13.	Visits to websites	30	6.98%	Third
14.	Communication with Arab League missions	30	6.98%	Third
Total		430	%100	-

The results show that the two sources (official work reports and direct professional experience) ranked first, with each occurring 50 times and representing 11.63%. The category (delegations and conferences) came in second place with a frequency of 40 times and a percentage of 9.30%.

Table (6) shows the extent to which the respondents are aware of the European Union's positions on Arab issues.

No.	Responses	Repetition	Percentage	Rank
1.	Very highly	20	33.33%	First
2.	Highly	20	33.33%	First
3.	Moderately	20	33.33%	First
4.	Lowly	-	-	-
5.	I don't follow	-	-	-
Total		60	100%	-

Table (6) shows the respondents' level of awareness of the European Union's positions on Arab issues, with 33.33% each of the categories "very high," "high," and "moderate." This indicates that the majority of the research sample is aware of and follows the European Union's positions on Arab issues. Conversely, no responses were recorded in the categories "low level" or "not following." This distribution reflects a clear balance in awareness levels among the sample, with a complete absence of low or non-following levels.

Table (7) shows the extent to which direct professional experience and institutional dealings with the European Union influence the formation of the respondents' mental image of it.

No.	Responses	Repetition	Percentage	Rank	Degree of freedom	value of ka2		Level of significance
						Calculated	The schedule	
1.	Very large effect	30	50%	1	4	32.66	4.49	0.05
2.	Large effect	20	33.33%	1				
3.	Moderate effect	-	-	-				
4.	Weak effect	10	16.67%	3				
5.	No effect at all	-	-	-				
Total		60	100%	-				

By applying the Chi-Square Tests to measure the significance of the differences between the responses, it was found that the calculated chi-square value was (32.66), which is a value that exceeds the tabulated value of (4.49) at a significance level of (0.05) and a degree of freedom of (4), which indicates that there are statistically significant differences between the opinions of the respondents.

Table (8) shows the respondents' evaluation of the European Union's foreign policy

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No.	Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Weighted Mean	Percentage Weight	Rank	Trend
1	There is a gap between European discourse and actual practice in some sensitive Arab issues	Count: 20	30	10	2.17	72.33	4	Neutral
		%; 33.33	50	16.67				
2	The European Union contributes to supporting political solutions to Arab conflicts in an objective and neutral manner	Count: 40	10	10	2.5	83.33	3	Agree
		%; 66.66	16.67	16.67				
3	European policy shows a tangible commitment to international law and human rights in the Arab region	Count: 10	20	30	1.67	55.67	6	Disagree
		%; 16.67	33.33	50				
4	The European Union seeks to enhance cooperation with Arab countries to address regional challenges such as terrorism and humanitarian crises	Count: 60	–	–	3	100	1	Agree
		%; 100	–	–				
5	European policy adheres to principles of justice and neutrality when dealing with the Palestinian and Gaza crises	Count: 10	20	30	1.67	55.67	6	Disagree

		Count: 10	20	30	1.67	55.67	6	Disagree
		%: 16.67	33.33	50				
6	The positions of the European Union effectively contribute to reducing tensions and conflicts in the Arab region	Count: 10	20	30	1.67	55.67	6	Disagree
		%: 16.67	33.33	50				
7	European policy contributes to supporting development and political and economic stability in Middle East issues	Count: 40	20	–	2.67	89	2	Agree
		%: 66.67	33.33	–				
8	The European Union's positions on Arab issues are weak compared to those of the United States	Count: 30	20	10	2.33	77.67	5	Agree
		%: 50	33.33	16.67				

Regarding Arab issues. N = (60).

Table (8) shows the respondents' evaluation of the European Union's foreign policy towards Arab issues through eight categories reflecting their different orientations. The category "The European Union seeks to enhance cooperation with Arab countries to address regional challenges such as terrorism and humanitarian crises" came in first place with a weighted mean of (3) and a percentage weight of (100%), indicating agreement. This was followed by the category "European policy contributes to supporting development and political and economic stability in Middle Eastern issues" in second place with a weighted mean of (2.67) and a percentage weight of (89%), and then the category "The European Union contributes to supporting political solutions to Arab conflicts in an objective and impartial manner" in third place with a weighted mean of (2.5) and a percentage weight of (83.33%).

Conclusions:

- 1- The study results showed that the respondents' mental image is primarily shaped within a professional and institutional framework, where direct experience and official reports play a decisive role, while the importance of indirect sources diminishes. This indicates that real-world, formal interaction with relevant parties is more influential than indirect exposure to information.

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- 2- The results indicate that the respondents possess a high and balanced level of awareness regarding the European Union's positions on Arab issues. Responses were concentrated within the top three levels, with equal percentages (33.33%), and a complete absence of low awareness or lack of follow-up. This demonstrates a general awareness and continuous engagement among all members of the sample, with only minor differences in the depth of knowledge.
- 3- The study results highlight the crucial importance of direct professional experience and institutional interaction with the European Union in shaping the respondents' mental image. It is clear that direct practical contact is the most influential factor compared to indirect sources, thus reinforcing the role of real-world experience in forming and solidifying impressions.
- 4- The results of the study indicate that the mental image of the European Union among the respondents is characterized by a clear duality, as it is viewed positively in the areas of cooperation and development, while this positivity declines when evaluating its positions on sensitive Arab issues, which indicates a gap between its developmental role and perceptions of neutrality and justice in its policies.

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****The questionnaire was presented to the expert committee consisting of:**

- Prof. Dr. Ali Jabbar Al-Shammari, Professor of Public Relations, University of Baghdad
 - Prof. Dr. Baqir Musa Jassim, Professor of Public Relations, University of Baghdad
 - Prof. Dr. Raed Ali Saleh Al-Jubouri, Director of the Department of Arab Organizations and Federations at the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States.
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