

# Al Jazeera's Changing Editorial Perspectives and the Saudi-Qatari Relationship

**Tarek Cherkaoui**, *Qatar Museums*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the changing political economy of Al Jazeera satellite television network<sup>1</sup> by examining three broad yet interrelated themes. The first concerns the extent to which Al Jazeera's overall editorial line has aligned with Qatar's foreign policy, in contrast to the initial stance, in which Qatari officials avoided any flagrant interference in Al Jazeera's affairs. The second theme considers the centrality of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and its resulting impact on Al Jazeera's editorial line. Cold and cautious at best, relations reached their lowest ebb in February 1996, when a Saudi-backed coup was foiled in Qatar. The failed coup compelled the Qatari rulers to invest heavily in soft power, and especially media. However, after 2007, for a few years, the Qatari and Saudi royal families addressed their longstanding differences and seemingly aligned their foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis certain dossiers, although the relationship between both parties has become tense again more recently. The third theme addressed is the considerable airtime provided by Al Jazeera in support of the Arab uprisings and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood. The reasons for this stance are examined as well as their implications. The intersection of these themes illustrates the geopolitical rationale which allowed Qatar to develop a distinctive international media presence and to become a player in the international community. This article explores the challenges posed by such developments for Qatar and Al Jazeera.

The decision to establish Al Jazeera under Qatari patronage was the result of several political and strategic factors. Initially, Al Jazeera articulated a non-authoritarian pan-Arab discourse and promoted a democratic, transnational Arab public sphere based on respect for all constituents. Subsequently, however, Qatar's foreign policy outlook, especially the complex relationship with powerful neighbor Saudi Arabia, seriously affected Al Jazeera's ideology, journalistic choices, and general orientation.

## **Qatar's leadership agenda in geopolitical context**

Historically, Qatar has always been significantly weaker than their neighbors. The ruling dynasty's key tactic was to ally with a big power in return for limited autonomy. This was the case under the British colonial rule. But after the 1971 British withdrawal from East of Suez until the early 1990s, Qatar's foreign policy was aligned with Saudi Arabia. They were the de facto protector of Qatar, and the Qatari leadership continually looked towards Saudi Arabia for guidance. However, the situation changed when the previous emir Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani (whose reign lasted from 1972 to 1995) gave the running of the state's day-to-day affairs to his eldest son, the-then Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, from 1992. The latter had a very different view on the future role of Qatar and sought to resist Saudi suzerainty.

As Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and threatened Saudi Arabia, it became clear that the Saudis were unable to defend their borders, let alone the small satellite states within its political sphere of influence. At this juncture, the Qatari leadership took a strategically important decision by signing military agreements with the United States, which allowed their military to use Qatar as a base for their operations. The need for Saudi Arabia's protection was thereby rendered superfluous and tensions escalated between both parties. This led to skirmishes on 30 September 1992, which left three Qatari soldiers dead. Similar low-intensity engagements were registered once more in 1994. The Saudi reaction came also in the form of economic pressures when the Saudi authorities blocked Qatari attempts to export its gas by pipeline to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Roberts, 2012).

In response, Qatar befriended radical Iran across the Gulf, restored relations with Saddam's Iraq, and began to normalize ties with Israel. These policies were completely at odds with those of Saudi Arabia. When Sheikh Khalifa tried to reverse course and curtail the powers given to his son, the latter ousted his father in a palace coup (Reuter News Service, 1995). This caused further tensions as regional actors were opposed to the removal of Sheikh Khalifa. In particular, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) supported the restoration of the former ruler (Kamrava, 2009: 403). In fact, it is widely believed that Saudi Arabia, apart from providing assistance to the ousted Emir, has also financially supported a counter-coup against Sheikh Hamad (BBC News, 2000). Such action severely damaged Saudi-Qatari relations (Roberts, 2012).

Once in power, Sheikh Hamad embarked on a highly publicized reform process involving steps toward liberalization and democratization. He sought to assert Qatar's autonomy and distinctiveness in comparison to its GCC neighborhood. Economic reforms were exemplified by the establishment of the Doha Stock Market as a vehicle for privatizing state assets and boosting the role of private investors. Elections began to take place for the Municipal Council and the Chamber of Commerce (its members were nominated previously by decree). International media was quick to hail the Municipal Council elections as a major democratic advance in the region. Some steps were also taken to boost freedom of expression, the main one being the removal of the Ministry of Information (Rathmell and Schulze, 2000: 53–54).

These initiatives were believed to have been chosen for reasons of foreign policy and domestic dynastic politics (Rathmell and Schulze, 2000: 47). Sheikh Hamad's accession to power alienated conservative factions aligned with the Saudi regime. Attracting the new Western-educated generation of Qataris was vital for the new regime, as they were an emerging force in government and the private sector. Another key goal was to win support from Western powers so as to keep any

regional threat at bay. Subsequently, as authors Andrew Rathmell and Kirsten Schulze explained at the time, the new regime “has not only emphasized democratization but also made overtures to Israel, agreed to host the controversial November 1997 Middle East and North Africa Economic Summit, and awarded large arms and energy contracts to Western firms” (Rathmell and Schulze, 2000: 60).

## **Al Jazeera’s Early Years**

During the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia controlled most Arab transnational media notably through Saudi owned print media such as *Al-Hayat* and *Acharq al-Awsat*, but also through a few Saudi owned transnational satellite broadcasters. These were the *Middle East Broadcast Corporation* (MBC) (1991), which catered to more than 130 million Arab speaking audiences around the world (based on 1996 estimations), and the *Arab Radio and Television* (ART) (1994), which was likewise successful.

Both MBC and ART were entertainment-focused, and so the Saudi government proposed the establishment of a 24/7 news channel and founded the satellite network ORBIT. For this purpose, ORBIT commissioned the BBC to produce Arab-World Television. For the BBC board, this was a way to penetrate the wealthy Gulf States market. This 1994 initiative floundered after the BBC aired some critical programs about the Saudi Royal family. Eventually, ORBIT-BBC was terminated in April 1996 (Richardson, 2003). One hundred and fifty former staff members of BBC Arabic, who had been trained for the ORBIT project, were made redundant. One of the dismissed journalists offered a business proposal for a professional 24-hour Arabic news channel to the Qatari government. The Emir of Qatar immediately accepted and Al Jazeera was born.

The launch of Al Jazeera allowed the Qatari leadership to kill several birds with one stone. Initially, venturing into the media field created a comparative advantage for Qatar over its neighbors. Several academics have indeed stated that the actual motive behind Qatar’s decision to launch Al-Jazeera was to have more leverage against rival Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia (El Oifi, 2005; Fandy, 2007; Sakr, 2002; Zayani, 2008). Launching Al Jazeera made it appear as if Qatar had effectively embarked on a journey to democracy. In the years following its inception, the Qatar based network set standards for its journalism and programming which were modelled on the BBC. Accordingly, anchors went on to explore controversial political, social and religious issues in ways which were simply unthinkable at that time. As Philip Seib observed:

On Al-Jazeera, everything from the role of women to the competence of governments is addressed, often loudly. The station’s motto is “the opinion, and the other opinion,” which might seem commonplace in the West, but is exceptional in the Arab media world (Seib, 2005: 601).

In retrospect, however, it is clear that the establishment of Al Jazeera was “more of a public declaration of the regime’s commitment to freedom of expression than actual implementation” (Rathmell and Schulze, 2000: 53).

The wisdom of the Qatari leadership consisted in minimizing any government interference with the network’s affairs. Therefore, despite being launched as a state-financed satellite channel, the Qatari government’s subtle distancing made Al Jazeera look similar to the BBC rather than a state-controlled Arab network (Schleifer, 2001). Early accounts by insiders illustrated the freedom enjoyed by Al Jazeera’s anchors and journalists. For example, one of the leading talk show hosts,

Faisal Al-Kasim, wrote in the late 1990s: “Al Jazeera’s editorial policy is so lax that I am hardly ever given orders regarding program content. The station has an even wider scope of freedom than the BBC Arabic radio, where I worked for ten years. I tackle issues that I never even dreamed of covering during my service at the BBC” (Al-Kasim, 1999). Several scholars hailed the Qatar based channel as the only satellite television service in the Arab world to deal with sensitive political, social and religious issues (Hafez, 2000: 75). Such an impetus undeniably obliged Arab politicians to become attentive to public opinion more than in the past (Alterman, 1999). Al Jazeera’s philosophy exposed the misdeeds of local regimes and served as a platform for opposition groups by airing controversial debates, and exposing corruption and widespread human rights abuses (Sakr, 2002: 55).

Previously, government-controlled television was the defining feature of local and regional broadcasting in the Arab region, and as a result television news was no more than a “mouthpiece for government policies vis-à-vis national, regional, and international issues and events” (Ayish, 2002: 138, 140). As Mark Lynch, the associate professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, succinctly observes, official Arab television media seldom tackled any sensitive issues. It consisted mainly of boring and repetitive coverage which sung the praise of the rulers’ trips inside and outside their countries (Lynch, 2005: 40).

The winds of freedom blown by Al Jazeera meant that repressive regimes could no longer preserve their monopoly on information. By transcending borders, satellite broadcasts were able to circumvent national controls. Al Jazeera’s daring editorial line drew a barrage of criticism from Arab officialdom, and a wave of complaints hit the Qatari establishment at the highest levels. The Tunisian government, for example, chose to withdraw its ambassador from Qatar. In 1999, the Algerian government jammed Al Jazeera’s signal to block a broadcast and considered its correspondents *persona non grata*. There were also commercial pressures; Saudi Arabia reportedly pressured advertisers to avoid the channel, and subsequently most multinational corporations complied with the Saudi directive.

### **Al Jazeera’s pan-Arab credentials**

An additional point which was scored, wittingly or unwittingly by the Qatari leadership, was the reinforcement of pan-Arab identity through Al Jazeera. As most Arab transnational satellite broadcasters were obliged to adopt pan-Arab themes to gain audiences, this had important consequences for local regimes; they could no longer imprint their so-called ‘national values’ upon their subjects. Authors Mohammed El Nawawy and Adel Iskandar explain this development:

... the connections that bind the 300 million Arabs in twenty-two countries are often abstract. It’s not a military alliance, a political truce, an economic cooperative, or a simple linguistic tie. It may not even be reduced to a common religion. Instead, what brings Arabs together is a notion of joint destiny (El Nawawy and Iskandar, 2002: 20).

Pan-Arab joint destiny is precisely the theme Al Jazeera’s editorial line conveyed during its first years of broadcasting. The coverage of the second Palestinian uprising (also called al-Aqsa Intifada) exemplified this stance, boosting in the process Al Jazeera’s profile among Arab transnational audiences. On 28 September 2000, the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, surrounded by hundreds of Israeli riot policemen, visited Al Haram Mosque in Jerusalem (the third holiest place in Islam). The day after Sharon’s visit, and following the Muslim Friday prayers, riots broke out in the West

Bank and Gaza. In a short period, dozens of Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army and thousands were injured. Al Jazeera, alongside other Arab transnational networks, seized this opportunity to obtain maximum coverage for the Arab World. To this end, Al Jazeera did not hesitate to air graphic footage of death and demolition in the West Bank and Gaza. These images were not screened by Western television networks, and this enhanced the reputation of Al Jazeera as a credible and reliable source of information in the Middle East. Several academics considered Al Jazeera's coverage of the 2000 Intifada as a major contribution to the pan-Arabist revival (Amin 2004; Kraidy 2002; Schneider 2000; Zayani, 2005). In fact, this coverage attracted the largest audience in the history of Arab broadcasting, and fully provided the Intifada itself with a pan-Arab dimension. Viewers from Morocco to Oman came to share the experiences of Palestinians confronting the Israeli military machine. The image of the young Mohammed al-Durra being shot by Israeli troops on 30 September 2000 gained international prominence. The video footage was provided by freelance cameraman Talal Abu Rahma, who worked for French Television *France 2*. Al Jazeera's repeated broadcasting of Al-Durrah's death became a rallying symbol for anti-Israel opposition throughout the Arab world. This recreated a pan-Arab sense of "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991).

Al Jazeera provided a stage for Arab intellectuals to exchange ideas and principles. The pan-Arab ideals, which Al Jazeera editorial line echoed, were merely an articulation of common cultural, social and economic bonds. Media research confirmed this trend. Mohammed Ayish showed in an exploratory study, that 73.3 percent of Al Jazeera's coverage was pan-Arab in orientation (Ayish, 2001). This positioning allowed Al Jazeera to expand its geographical reach, in the sense that the network's coverage of issues of interest to Arab peoples increased its presence throughout the Middle Eastern market. They provided what the public wanted and reflected public opinion across the Middle East (Kifner, 2001).

Yet unlike other expressions of Pan-Arabism, Al Jazeera's version adapted to modern realities. It did not advocate any unity guided by political authoritarianism; rather, it promoted civil solidarities across Arab societies by making public argument accessible. Al Jazeera promoted a new culture of communication, which embraced dialog and tolerated dissent. Al Jazeera's official motto, namely *Al-rai wa rai al-akhar* (the opinion and the opposite opinion), spread the idea that the viewpoints of others should be respected and discussed peacefully.

## **Al Jazeera and Qatar's growing international role (2001–2008)**

As stated earlier, the Qatar based network made a name in the Middle East by airing all viewpoints, however controversial they may have been. Al Jazeera lined up Iraqi Baathists against Kuwaiti nationalists, pro-Iranian Shiites against pro-Saudi Sunnites, religious fundamentalists against ultra-secularists, Kurds and Berbers against pan-Arabists. In this context, they had no qualms about airing Osama Bin Laden's tapes after the 11 September 2001 attacks. From Al Jazeera's editorial perspective, Bin Laden was simply another extreme voice open to criticism by detractors, and Omar Al Issawi, one of the channel's veteran staffers stated: "we do not believe in a blackout on Bin Laden. We know that if we do not broadcast that somebody else will" (Al-Issawi and Pattiz, 2003). Even so, the Qatar based network brought in cohorts of analysts and commentators after every controversial broadcast to deconstruct the Al Qaeda ideology from all perspectives, secular and religious. For example, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the renowned pro-Muslim Brotherhood cleric who regularly featured on Al Jazeera, fiercely criticized Bin Laden's brand of

Islam, a remarkable intervention that received little attention in the West (Lynch, 2003). Al Jazeera also regularly invited American diplomats, such as Christopher Ross and Alberto Fernandez (both Arabic speakers) to respond to Al Qaeda's claims, while maintaining a permanent reporter at the US Central Command in Qatar to relay their perspective. Therefore, official accusations that Al Jazeera acted as a "mouthpiece for terrorists" were not supported by evidence (Miles, 2005: 360). In any case, Al Jazeera's graphic coverage of American air-strikes in Afghanistan and the circulation of Bin Laden's videotapes quickly became a public relations crisis for the Bush administration, while providing worldwide attention for the Qatar based broadcaster.

But it was the War on Iraq in 2003 which considerably enhanced the status of Al Jazeera. The Qatar based channel, adopted an alternative discourse during the war, providing airtime to anti-war activists and forces opposed to the American-led war. In this context, Al Jazeera relied on an extensive network of correspondents on the ground, thus providing good footage and, more often than not, credible information. Al Jazeera crews understood the language and the culture, and thus provided a constant flow of valuable information and imagery to the control room in Doha. The negative reactions from the Bush administration and the general barrage of criticism to which Al Jazeera was subjected, simply reinforced the credibility of the Arab network, while the targeting of its bureau in Baghdad became a major international media story. This state of affairs raised the profile of Al Jazeera. The latter became identified as a major challenger to the dominant Western media discourse.

It is worth mentioning that the success of the Al Jazeera model was about to face stiff competition. Against the backdrop of the rivalry between the two countries, the Saudis launched a television news satellite network—Al Arabiya, which literally means "The Arabic One". This represented an attempt to compete with Al Jazeera for pan-Arab audiences. It is worth noting as well that the launch of Al Arabiya took place barely two weeks before the start of the Iraq War (3 March 2003) with the aim of countering the increasing influence of the Qatar based network. During an interview with the New York Times in 2008, Al-Arabiya's General Manager Abdul Rahman Al Rashed confirmed that Al-Arabiya set out to outmaneuver Al Jazeera at its own game (Worth, 2008). The establishment of Al-Arabiya was Saudi Arabia's response to Qatar's growing "soft power" in the region (Rockower, 2008: 6). The Saudi leadership was clearly alarmed with the rise of anti-Saudi sentiments in the West and the Middle East, which put the Saudi leaders in a vulnerable position. Al Arabiya was supposed to represent a vision of moderation in the region, as opposed to Al Jazeera's willingness to provide Islamist groups like al-Qaeda with airtime (Hammond, 2007).

Notwithstanding such developments, the Qatari leadership capitalized on the network's image for its own reputation in mediation, which turned Qatar into an important and indispensable player in Middle Eastern politics. Qatar's diplomacy initiated a series of conflict mediation exercises in conflict-prone areas of the Middle East. Thus Qatar hosted talks between belligerents from Palestine, Lebanon, Darfur, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Libya. They all came to seek Qatar's help in setting up peace negotiations. Such a proactive peacemaking strategy undeniably enhanced Qatar's soft power role and global image (Dickinson, 2012).

## **The Saudi – Qatar Relationship warms (2007–2011)**

In the meantime, post Iraq War developments clearly took the GCC governments by surprise. While it was expected that a strong pro-American government would take the power in Iraq following the

demise of the Bath party, the new scenario in Iraq eventually gave full power to pro-Iran political forces. The US-led invasion of Iraq paved the way for Iranian supremacy by eliminating Tehran's key enemies in the region—Saddam Hussein's regime in the West, and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The fact that a pro-Iranian government and Shiite-led political system emerged in Iraq, constituted a worst-case regional scenario for Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In the former case, Iran represents an ideological mirror image. Iran is a revolutionary republic, while Saudi Arabia is a conservative monarchy, and both claim to be the sole legitimate representative of 'Islam' in the political sphere. Iran's primacy in the region exacerbated Saudi insecurities, and accelerated confrontation between the two main alliances in the Middle East. The first one, led by Saudi Arabia, includes those countries under the Gulf Cooperation Council in addition to several other pro-US Arab countries such as Jordan and Morocco. The second alliance is led by Iran and stretches throughout the so-called "Shiite Crescent", which includes Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in addition to parts of northern Yemen. Such repositioning was foreseen by Vali Nasr, who, in 2004, published an article in the *Washington Quarterly* entitled "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq". He predicted several repercussions of the new order, not least the exacerbation of Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflicts leading to a geo-strategic rearrangement in the Middle East.

Iran's strategic location, controlling both the Gulf and the Caspian Sea is complemented by reserves of natural gas—the second largest in the world, and proven reserves of conventional oil—the second largest in the world. Effectively, Iran's hydrocarbon resources are equal to those of Saudi Arabia and significantly greater than those of Russia (Leverett, 2006: 9). Iran thus has substantial leverage over the international energy market. Moreover, Iran has frenetically developed an ambitious arms manufacturing program, including unconventional weapons. This has boosted Iran's bold foreign policy, and allowed Tehran to assert its control over several state and non-state players in the Middle East (e.g. Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah).

Iran's ascendancy played a major role in diluting antagonistic exchanges between Saudi Arabia and Qatar after 2007. Iran's control of Iraqi affairs was not the only source of concern to the Saudis. The Iranian meddling in Yemeni affairs was regarded with greater apprehension by the Saudi monarchy; they have long considered Yemen as a security threat and have therefore interfered in Yemeni politics since the 1930s (Gause, 1990). The Iranian regime found natural allies in the Houthis in Yemen. The latter, a Shiite insurgent group, which has been operating since 2004, had gained control of two Yemeni governorates (also partially controlling other regions) by the end of 2011. Threatened by such developments, the Saudi military actively participated in bombing the heartland of the Houthis in 2009, and subsequently stepped up military support to the Yemeni regime.

The increasing threats from its northern borders (Iraq), southern borders (Yemen), the Levant (Syria and Hezbollah), and throughout the shores of the Gulf, compelled the Saudi leadership to seek all the regional support it could get from its GCC neighbors. At the same time, Qatar was engaged in mediation with conflicting factions, such as the Houthis and the Yemeni government, and between the Hezbollah and other groups in Lebanon. These mediations have given Qatari diplomats good insights concerning the threats that Iranian proxies pose to regional stability. Qatar's role can be defined as "attempting to contain those conflicts and prevent their spreading closer to home" (Khatib, 2013: 418).

These dynamics provide a rationale for the surprise visit made by the former Prime Minister of Qatar to Saudi Arabia in September 2007 on behalf a high level delegation including Sheikh Hamad. Such a bold move turned the page on long-standing disagreements, and opened a new

chapter of cooperation. It was clear that the Qatari leadership, renowned for its adherence to *realpolitik*, was mindful of the limits of soft power. Qatari and Saudi ruling families have become wary of “instability—and political transition—reaching their own territories, which pushes them more towards cooperation than confrontation” (Khatib, 2013: 419).

It should be noted that the chairman of Al-Jazeera took part in the above-mentioned meeting. According to Tal Samuel-Azran, WikiLeaks exposed, in 2010, a communication sent by the US Ambassador to Qatar, Joseph Lebron, in which the latter accused Al Jazeera of purposefully muting criticism of Saudi Arabia as part of a September 2007 agreement that ended the five year conflict between Qatar and the Saudi Kingdom (Samuel-Azran, 2013: 1295). Allegations regarding the Qatari–Saudi political deal and Al-Jazeera’s involvement were subsequently reported by the *New York Times*. Journalist Robert Worth cited correspondence with an Al-Jazeera staffer who asserted that Al-Jazeera management used to provide its reporters with negative articles about Saudi Arabia to influence their mindset. However, following the 2007 resolution with Saudi Arabia, the same management gave an explicit order preventing any coverage of Saudi Arabia’s issues without obtaining prior approval from the hierarchy (Samuel-Azran, 2013: 1295; Worth, 2008).

In any case, the effects of the Saudi-Qatari reconciliation were abrupt. The Saudi monarch attended the Gulf Cooperation Council Summit in Doha in December 2007, while the Saudi crown prince also visited Qatar. Another high level meeting was hosted by Saudi Arabia in June 2008, in which border issues were settled and a joint committee was established to “strengthen political, security, financial, economic, commercial, investment, cultural and media relations” (Al Qassemi, 2011). In parallel with these summits, Qatar managed to reap several lucrative contracts in Saudi Arabia. One example was the award by Saudi Arabia’s General Authority for Civil Aviation of a license to Qatar Airways, the first foreign airline to operate in Saudi Arabia (Reuters, 2012).

### **Saudi–Qatar Relations, Al Jazeera, and the Arab Spring**

In the meantime, on 18 December 2010 the Arab World was hit with a wave of demonstrations that started in Tunisia but soon spilled over into neighboring Arab countries. The Arab Spring protests were at first peaceful, but soon became mired in violence and, in some cases, civil war. By May 2014, rulers had been forced from power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.

From a Qatari perspective, the Arab Spring represented the perfect occasion to shift the Middle East balance of power in its favor. Hence the Qatari rulers hurried to cash-in on two strategic choices they had made during the previous decades—knitting a web of influence with Islamist movements, and establishing a media empire. Both these assets came into play as the Emirate took sides in successive Arab Spring upheavals.

In contrast, the Saudi regime was afraid that the Arab Spring would have domestic repercussions. Saudi authorities granted asylum to ousted Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali who fled there on 14 January 2011 following mass protests. Saudi Arabia also worked with the Mubarak regime to impede any revolutionary change in Egypt. In fact, the Saudi rulers were perplexed and disappointed by the way the Obama administration was handling the situation, especially Washington’s message to Mubarak to step aside in favor of democratic change. The Saudis went to the extent of accusing the United States of abandoning one of their key strategic allies in the region (Khoury, 2013). However, Saudi Arabia supported revolutionary elements in Libya and Syria, in line with a long standing animosity against both regimes. So while both the Saudi and Qatari rulers remained aligned in some cases (e.g. over Bahrain, Oman, Libya, and



Syria), they were diametrically opposed in other situations (e.g. Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen). The divergence over political developments in the latter countries clearly strained Saudi–Qatari relations.

In the wake of protests taking place in Gulf countries (such as Bahrain), in which thousands gathered to call for democratic reforms, GCC officials held an emergency meeting to support the ruling families. In Bahrain, armed forces moved into the main square and forcefully removed sleeping demonstrators, triggering a wave of repression which carried on for several months. Up to 1,500 people were arrested and several thousand more were fired from their jobs. Moreover, GCC troops were sent in support of the Bahraini monarchy. In Oman, the unrest was less intense as the authorities there swiftly responded by firing 12 cabinet ministers and ordering a salary rise across the government sector (Colombo, 2012: 113). However, in both cases, Al Jazeera's coverage was meek if not absent. In the case of Bahrain, Qatar contributed forces to help suppress the uprising in Bahrain and Al Jazeera refrained from providing coverage of the repression. This was peculiar considering that Al Jazeera has championed practically every other uprising in the Middle East (Khoury, 2013: 76).

In the post-Arab spring era, Al Jazeera's line was sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>2</sup>. The Qatar based network, as Marc Lynch asserts, has always been "consumed by questions of authenticity and identity" (Lynch, 2006: 19) and therefore it does serve a wide variety of publics, including many Islamists. The latter tends to be, according to Lynch, under-represented (Lynch, 2006). Al Jazeera has since its launch featured the religious program Religion and Life during prime time. The main guest of this show is Yusuf Al Qaradawi, an Egyptian imam known for his close connections with the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>3</sup>. Thanks to his weekly appearance on this program, Al Qaradawi has become a household name for many Arabic-speaking Muslim communities worldwide. His show has also enhanced the reputation of Al-Jazeera as a "good" Muslim channel (Cherribi, 2006: 129)

It should be noted that the association of Al Qaradawi with Qatar is deeply rooted. He was sent by the Al-Azhar University in Egypt to Qatar back in 1962 to head the Qatari Secondary Institute of Religious Studies. He then laid the foundation, in 1977, for the Faculty of Shari'ah and Islamic Studies in the University of Qatar and became the faculty's dean. As such, he established close ties with educational and religious circles, as well as the political establishment. The latter seemed to give credence to Islamist grievances. Accordingly, the Qatari government had no qualms in offering refuge to Islamists from all over the world. Several of these exiles were Muslim brothers, and so they gradually constituted Al Qaradawi's entourage and progressively took on new roles as management executives, media pundits, and financial consultants. This network grew in influence; some of its major successes included the appointment of the Jordanian Wadah Khanfar as Director General of Al Jazeera after the War on Iraq (2003). Commentators often criticized Mr. Khanfar for his sympathy to the Muslim Brotherhood, which was reflected in the often favorable coverage of Islamist movements (Black, 2011). A related development was the appointment of Tunisian Rafiq Abdul-Salam to lead Al Jazeera's Research Center. Following the 2011 Tunisian revolution, he filled the position of Foreign Minister on behalf of the An-Nahda Party, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Tunisia.

When Qatar's government moved to change Wadah Khanfar in 2011, it replaced him with a member of the Qatari royal family, which signaled a tighter control of the network's reins. In his resignation announcement, Mr. Khanfar outlined Al Jazeera's role in the Arab Spring. According to him:

In 2011 the eyes of the world watched the aspirations of millions unfold as our newsrooms broadcast, tweeted and published the events unfolding in the Liberation Squares from Sidi Bouzid to Jisr Al-Shughur. The coverage of these revolutions is ongoing, and we continue to report the fight of the youth to achieve dignity and freedom from tyranny and dictatorship (Black, 2011).

The symbiotic relationship between Al Jazeera and the Muslim Brotherhood remained strong at Al Jazeera even after Mr. Khanfar's departure. One organizational explanation is the fact that Al Jazeera had recruited from its inception several key anchors and management executives known for their affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>4</sup> From a strategic perspective, the influence of Muslim Brotherhood upon the Qatar owned network could be understood through the prism of Qatar's rivalry with Saudi Arabia. It should be noted that the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood movement waned sharply in the aftermath of the 9/11 bombings. In 2011, the Qatari leadership saw another opportunity to use the Islamist movement. Qatar could project its prestige in the Arab world, while distancing itself further from Saudi Arabia (Steinberg, 2012: 4). It was precisely this scheme that unfolded during the Arab Spring.

In fact, the Al Jazeera coverage of the Arab Spring constituted, in the view of several observers, a clear deviation from its early ambitions to provide balanced news coverage. Al Jazeera has made many Arab viewers question its veracity by taking the side of some activists (in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria), while clearly ignoring others (such as in Bahrain and Oman) (The Economist, 2013).

The Egyptian case perfectly illustrates the abovementioned criticism. Initially, the Qatar based network played a key role in relaying the voice of the opposition during Egypt's 2011 revolution which toppled Hosni Mubarak. However, its editorial line shored up those Egyptian Islamists linked to the Muslim Brotherhood group. In fact, Al Jazeera launched its newest program, namely Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr (Al Jazeera Live Egypt), a few days after the fall of Egyptian President Mubarak. This channel is dedicated to covering Egyptian affairs 24/7 and has provided, since its establishment, considerable coverage to pro-Muslim Brotherhood news and views. It would frequently air interviews of the leaders of the group, who in turn returned the favor by sending open messages of support to the network and its management (Al Qassemi, 2012). This state of affairs cannot be separated from Qatar's general support for the now overthrown President Morsi, which took the form of huge investments and loans to keep his pro-Muslim Brotherhood regime afloat. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia fully supported the military junta, which ejected Morsi, and injected billions of dollars into the Egyptian economy and its military organizations. Saudi Arabia, in total contrast to Qatar, is diametrically opposed to all revolutionary movements in the Arab world (Lippman, 2013). In fact, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) supported Hosni Mubarak and the Ben Ali Regime in Tunisia. Saudi Arabia welcomed the latter after he fled from Tunisia and refused to extradite him at the request of the new Tunisian government. These events revealed to them, more than ever before, the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have since taken the lead in organizing counter-revolutionary movements in the region, with Bahrain as the first center stage (Gresh, 2012).

One of the consequences of the Saudi-UAE push-back was the military putsch against the Brotherhood backed President Mohammad Morsi. This event led Al Jazeera to see more reasons for supporting the revolution, not less. The Doha based network didn't shy away from calling the military's ouster of Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi a coup. This position has turned Al Jazeera into an arch enemy of the Egyptian junta. The latter has done everything in its power to harass the

Al Jazeera journalists, arrest them and stop their operations (Farhi, 2014). From another perspective, the Al Jazeera stance and coverage was criticized for lack of balance. In an article entitled “Al-Jazeera’s Awful Week”, Emirati commentator Sultan Al Qassemi criticized the pan-Arab network’s twisting of ground level reality, particularly its masking of the vast resistance against the Muslim Brotherhood regime by a majority of people in Egypt (Al Qassemi, 2013). In fact, Al Jazeera support took unprecedented forms, as the network’s senior management hosted and paid for Egyptian-affiliated Muslim Brotherhood exiles in hotel suites (Hauslohner, 2013). This state of affairs led to 22 staff members from Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr to resign in July 2013 in protest against what they claimed to be a “coverage that was out of sync with real events in Egypt” (Youssef, 2013: para. 4).

Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Libyan uprising against the rule of Colonel Moammar Gaddafi followed a comparable pattern. The fighters of the opposition were routinely branded “martyrs”, while casualties on the regime’s side were ignored. While Al Jazeera again gave extensive airtime to Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers, the Qatari government committed warplanes to help NATO-led forces enforce a United Nations mandate aimed at protecting Libyan civilians. In parallel with Qatar’s involvement, the network began using the tri-color flag of the Libyan revolutionaries instead of the green flag of the Gaddafi regime (Salama, 2012). This pro-Islamist stance coincided with discontent from many quarters in Libya concerning the Qatari intervention. Time Magazine’s Steven Sotloff wrote: “Qatar provided a narrow clique of Islamists with arms and money, giving them great leverage over the political process” (2012: para. 6). Sotloff quoted former National Transitional Council (NTC) Deputy Prime Minister Ali Tarhouni as saying, “I think what they [Qatar] have done is basically support the Muslim Brotherhood” (Ali Tarhouni cited in Sotloff, 2012: para 6).

In Syria, a similar scenario unfolded. Several Muslim Brotherhood affiliated journalists were instrumental in handling the Al Jazeera Syria Desk operations. For example, Syrian-born Ahmad al-Abda who runs the desk is the brother of Anas al-Abda, himself a member of the Syrian National Council and a theorist for the Muslim Brotherhood. Also, Ahmad Zaidan, a key person in this operation, is known for his Syrian Brotherhood association during a previous uprising in the early 1980s (Mahdi, 2012). These staffers exaggerated the claims of the opposition and aired testimonies that were not corroborated from independent sources, to build pressure against the Syrian regime. There were a few attempts to correct the biased tone of coverage, notably by Ibrahim Helal, Al Jazeera Arabic head of news, but such attempts failed, and the latter eventually had to toe the official line (Mahdi, 2012).

Criticizing this situation, Several Arab columnists point to controversies affecting the Qatar based network, including the series of high-level resignations by disgruntled staff over what they claim is biased coverage of the situation in Syria. Some suggested that Al Jazeera staffers were involved in the manufacture of testimonies and the coaching of eyewitnesses (Raad and Amp, 2012).

It is obvious that the highest echelons within Al Jazeera built a symbiotic inter-relationship with Muslim Brotherhood figures. The Qatar based network is already employing several high profile anchors and correspondents known for their activism within the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Consequently, the Al Jazeera newsroom was more than supportive of the movement’s principles, and adhered uncritically at times to them. Al Jazeera was also unable to balance these opinions by giving room to alternative views.

## Conclusion

In summary, it seems that Al Jazeera has moved from its anterior position of advancing journalistic independence and pan-Arab debate against authoritarian regimes and propaganda systems. Al Jazeera's official motto and initial editorial ethos (the opinion and the opposite opinion), according to which all viewpoints should be respected and given airtime, is no longer treasured. Furthermore, Al Jazeera's earlier promotion of a pan-Arab public sphere has also been adversely affected. It is well known that the Muslim Brotherhood adheres to Pan-Islamism, the archenemy and substitute for Pan-Arabism. While both share the trans-border dimension, the former ideology is a form of religious nationalism which advocates the unity of Muslims under one Islamic state (either as a Caliphate or as an international organization, similar to a European Union, with Islamic principles). In any case, Pan-Islamism excludes culture and ethnicity as enablers of unification and does not give credence to other themes, such as Arab solidarities or public sphere ideals.

The aforementioned shift in Al Jazeera seems to have happened in order to complement the desire of Qatari officialdom to counter Saudi Arabia's hegemony. Since 2011, Qatar's leadership has changed its foreign policy outlook from that of a mediator relying on soft power, to that of an active player prepared to use hard power across the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa. Al Jazeera was a key piece in this design. Yet, Qatar cannot sustain such a position; as revealed by the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and Egypt. Qatar's Gulf neighbors have also seen an opportunity to get the upper hand and thwart the Brotherhood movement in the Gulf and across the Middle East. In fact, there are some signs that Qatar is currently seeking to recalibrate its foreign policy, especially after the ascension of a new Emir to the highest position of power. In November 2013, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah requested that Qatar's new Emir conduct a total reorientation of Qatar's foreign policy under the pretext of promoting GCC security. The Qatari leader promised to address the matter but subsequently declined to make any concessions. In appearance, Qatar's support of the Brotherhood continued and Al Jazeera continues to provoke the ire of Saudi Arabia and the UAE with its anti-Egyptian Junta coverage. The recent withdrawal (March 2014) of the Saudi, UAE and Bahraini Ambassadors from Qatar was a major warning to the latter, and probably a signal of more developments to come. One signal that things may have indeed started to move in a different direction is the recent announcement that Qatar is 'launching a new television station as a political counterweight to Al Jazeera amid concern the network has become too supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood'. The new Arabic-language station is to be based in London and will broadcast across the Arab world. The general manager, Azmi Bishara, is known to be critical of the Brotherhood (Vela, 2014). While there is little information on the soon to be launched station, it is almost certain that this new television network will cannibalize existing Al Jazeera audiences and diverge editorially from its Doha-based rival network on several dossiers.

## Author Bio

Tarek holds a PhD in Media and Communication Studies from the Auckland University of Technology (New Zealand), and a Master's Degree in Strategic Studies from the National University of Malaysia. He is the author of *The News Media at War: The Clash of Western and Arab networks in the Middle East* (published by I. B. Tauris in 2014). Research interests include topics such as the Arab transnational broadcasting media, the Arab public sphere, international news framing, and information warfare.

## Endnotes

[1] For clarity purposes, the unit of analysis in this article is Al Jazeera Arabic, not the English version of the Qatar based news network, which tends to abide by somewhat different editorial principles.

[2] The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is Egypt's oldest and largest Islamist organization. Founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, the movement initially aimed to spread Islamic morals and good works, but soon became involved in politics by opposing British colonialism, as well as the establishment of Israel. The Egyptian government dissolved the group in late 1948 for attacking British and Jewish interests. The MB was accused of assassinating the then Prime Minister of Egypt. While MB officially denounced this assassination, its founder was subsequently shot dead by an unknown gunman, believed to have ties with the security apparatus. It is thought that the group membership reached 400,000 members in the late 1940s. But in 1952, colonial rule came to an end following a military coup d'état led by a group of young officers. The MB soon became sour. The former accused the latter of organizing a failed attempt against President Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1954. Since then, and for several decades, the group was banned and thousands of members imprisoned and tortured. MB continued to work underground, prompting an important shift in the ideology of some of its members. Such a shift was noticeable in the writing of one prominent member. Sayyid Qutb, who called for resistance and radical action (jihad) against non-Islamic societies. Qutb's writings and particularly *Milestones* (1964), inspired the creation of many radical Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda. It should be noted that the influence of radical elements within the MB gradually waned. More moderate factions prevailed within the MB, leading the movement to re-join the political mainstream during the 1980s. Electoral democracy was accepted as a means of political change. The MB has since influenced Islamist movements around the world with its model of political activism combined with Islamic charity work.

[3] The Muslim Brotherhood movement is to be differentiated from Salafism. The latter is a puritan orthodox movement which emphasizes close adherence to the model of the Salaf or predecessors. This implies that in theory Salafis reject any method or practice not applied by the early Muslims. Salafis, too, are split into several factions; some adhere to radical violence, while others consider themselves apolitical. However, there has been an ideological shift in Egypt lately with the creation of Al Noor Party. This party has recuperated the remnants of Salafi student movements which clashed in the 1980s with MB students in universities. The Salafis in the past had refused to take part in electoral politics because they believed those to be un-Islamic. They also refrained from participating in the 2011 revolution. However, after the revolution, the Salafis decided to take part in politics claiming they needed to protect the Islamic identity of Egypt. Thus they created, in June 2011, the Al Noor Party. The latter fully supported the coup d'état against the MB-led government.

[4] For example, Ahmed Mansour a star presenter at Al Jazeera with programmes such as *Bela Hodod* (Without Frontiers) and *Shahed Ala Al-Asr* (A Witness to History), was in his early days the editor in chief of the Muslim Brotherhood Magazine *Al Mujtamaa* (Society).

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