

Al Jazeera Television: Rhetoric of Deflection

Mahmoud R. Al-Sadi

Abstract

Some media scholars and commentators argue that Al Jazeera is radicalizing Arab audiences; others argue that the channel is moderating the beliefs of both the Arab public and Arab regimes. A third group of scholars and commentators argues that Al Jazeera, despite its identification with the Arab masses, is still in line with other official mass media, whose primary objective is to advance and defend the interests of the host government.¹

To contribute to the ongoing debate over Al Jazeera, and to help situate Al Jazeera more accurately in the matrix of Arab mass media, I offer a close reading of the channel's political discourse on issues that sharply divide the Arab public from the Qatari government and other Arab regimes.

The evidence emerging from textual analysis of the channel's political discourse indicates that identification between the channel and the majority of the Arab masses does not signal a substantive, liberational rhetoric. Rather, identification signals a widely used rhetorical strategy that allows Al Jazeera to ultimately deflect the viewers' radicalism and channel it towards nonviolent political ideologies that are conducive to Qatari interests and policies. Furthermore, by indirectly connecting Qatar with the anti-establishment viewers, Al Jazeera reinvents Qatari autocracy, depicting it as an acceptable form of governance.

Al Jazeera: The Ongoing Debate

The radical political changes now under way in Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria have rekindled the debate over the most viewed pan-Arab news TV station—Al Jazeera. As evidenced by the Arab audiences' sustained interest in and constant attraction to it, Al Jazeera's popularity is hardly a contested issue, nor is the basis for this popularity, i.e. the "easy fit" between the channel's bold anti-establishment political discourses and the beliefs and attitudes of the Arab masses at large (Ajami, 2002; Bakri, 2002; Brumberg, 2003; El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003; Khouri, 2001; Lynch, 2006; Sakr, 2001; Zayani, 2007, among others). What remains contested and hotly debated, however, are the motives,

¹ This article is derived from a doctoral dissertation entitled "Al-Jazeera Television: Intifada on the Air" (University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, May 2011).

implications and possible impact of the channel's "anti-establishment" discourses on Arab audiences, and, hence, the political stability of the Arab world, and possibly the world at large.

This question, ever since the establishment of Al Jazeera in 1996, has been answered differently by proponents of three contending perspectives on the channel. Some scholars and observers argue that Al Jazeera, because of its anti-establishment rhetoric, which caters to and lends credence to the "radicalism" of the majority of the Arab populations, is a radicalizing force (e.g., Ajami, 2001; Alt, 2004; Brumberg, 2002; Friedman, 2001, among others). Proponents of the second perspective (e.g., Alterman, 2004; El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003; Marc Lynch, 2006; Michael Wolff, 2003, among others) believe exactly the opposite, arguing that Al Jazeera, possibly because of the anti-establishment tone of its political discourse, becomes a manifestation and transmitter of noble and coveted Western values (free speech, democracy, tolerance and acknowledgment of the "other," etc.), which, in the long run, will help moderate "radical" Arab populations; that, in turn, renders Al Jazeera a moderating force.

A third group of scholars and commentators diverges completely from the radicalizing-moderating paradigm of thinking, providing us instead with an alternative reading of Al Jazeera grounded in the politico-historical context in which it came to life. Subscribers to this line of thinking argue that the channel, despite its starkly anti-establishment rhetoric, is not a historical anomaly, as far as its establishment and objectives are concerned; Al Jazeera, they contend, is in line with other state-sponsored Arab mass media that aim, first and foremost, at serving and defending the strategic interests of the host state (Al-Dajani, 2002; El-Iryan, 2002; Khouri, 2001, Sakr, 2005; Zayani, 2007, among others). Despite the profound contributions of the three perspectives to our understanding of the Al Jazeera phenomenon, the narrative of Al Jazeera that emerges out of each one of them is either incoherent, as in the case of a radicalizing-moderating paradigm of thinking, or inadequate, as in the case of the third argument, whose proponents maintain that Al Jazeera is not a historical anomaly (Al-Sadi, 2011).

The incoherence of the radicalizing-moderating argument stems from one or more of the following factors that blur our understanding of Al Jazeera. The first of these factors is the set of cultural or ideological biases and objectives that commentators bring to their analyses of Al Jazeera. For example, scholars, observers and other parties (Arab or foreign) who were unsympathetic to the Palestinian Second Intifada of 2000, who zealously supported and advocated the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and who, more recently, took either a sceptical or overtly hostile stance towards the current Arab revolutions and uprisings, argued that Al Jazeera caters to the radicalism of Arab populations, and endorses and inflames their anti-establishment, anti-Israel, anti-U.S. passions. In contrast, other Arab or foreign scholars and commentators who took the opposite stance on the same issues praised Al Jazeera's professionalism and its use of Western journalistic values and practices that many Western media outlets have abandoned in their coverage of those issues. In both cases, the result is a narrative of Al Jazeera that tells us more about the narrator than it does about Al Jazeera itself.

A second factor that undermines the radicalizing-moderating paradigm is the exclusion of a key element in the culture of Arab political communication—namely, the calculated ambiguity of Arab political discourse, regardless of the political identity of the speaker (see Abdul-Raof, 2006; Al-Sadi, 2011). Pro-establishment figures, for instance, inject a degree of ambiguity into their discourse in order to bridge the gap between an unpopular political establishment and the disenfranchised population. Anti-establishment speakers, on the other hand, use the same tactic to avoid prosecution, or even persecution, by their tyrannical regimes. Thus, in the context of political communication, to read Al Jazeera's discourses literally is, generally speaking, to misread them.

A third factor that threatens the integrity of this narrative of Al Jazeera derives from ignoring the implications of the politico-historical context in which Al Jazeera was born. I am referring specifically to the Qatar-Al Jazeera connection. Once we incorporate this connection into the narrative of Al Jazeera, the channel becomes, first and foremost, a mere manifestation of Qatari pragmatism. Al Jazeera, in other words, is far from representing any drastic societal or political transformation (Khouri, 2001; Sakr, 2001; Telhami, 2004). A fourth factor that weakens the radicalizing-moderating line of understanding is the tendency to dismiss the norms, beliefs, and objectives that govern Arab audiences' interactions with any particular mass medium. Historically, the popularity of a given mass medium in the Arab world (the BBC, for instance) says more about the needs and expectations of the Arab audiences than it does about the medium itself (Al-Sadi, 2011). Put in different words, the relationship between the popularity of a mass medium like Al Jazeera and its possible effect on the Arab audience is more problematic than presumed by the proponents of a radicalizing-moderating perspective.

When proponents of the radicalizing-moderating line of thinking fail to take this set of factors into account, it chips away at the validity of their arguments and their ability to offer a more coherent narrative of Al Jazeera. But this does not automatically qualify the third argument as adequate. Despite its strength, the context-sensitive narrative of Al Jazeera, which aligns it functionally with the general paradigm of state-sponsored Arab mass media, sounds somewhat counter-intuitive, when one takes into consideration the implications of the following clearly anti-establishment remarks, delivered by one of the channel's presenters:

America is Israel, isn't it? Israel is America, isn't it? Isn't there a complete harmony in their visions? Therefore, the United States is our principal enemy, however we look at the facts... Why then do the majority of Arab regimes throw themselves into the lap of the enemy, knowing very well that it [the United States] is the enemy of their peoples and their interests? (Al Jazeera, June 12, 2000)

At face value, these remarks identify the speaker fully with the beliefs and attitudes of the majority of the Arab masses rather than with the perspective and policies of the Qatari

establishment. This point of identification, in turn, weakens the context-sensitive argument, rendering it somewhat counter-intuitive and rather inadequate.

A more accurate reading of Al Jazeera requires the overcoming of both the incoherence of the radicalizing-moderating argument and the inadequacy of the context-sensitive argument. To this purpose, one must read Al Jazeera's "anti-establishment" discourse critically in order to extract textual evidence that allows us to situate the channel in its proper historical, political and rhetorical space.

Al Jazeera Channel: An Alternative Narrative

Over a five-year period, 1999 through 2003, I closely read the channel's political discourse on three key political issues (the Arab-Israeli conflict, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the question of Arab unification) as covered primarily by three of the channels' most popular programs, Faisal Al-Qasim's "The Opposite Direction," Ahmad Mansour's "Without Bounds," and Sami Haddad's "More Than One Opinion." At other points in my analysis of Al Jazeera's political discourse, I also examined the coverage of the same political issues in two other popular programs, Yusuf al-Qaradawi's "Religion and Life" and "Al Jazeera Pulpit."

Based on the findings of my textual analysis, I argue that the channel's anti-establishment discourse is far from being a manifestation of a substantive, liberational, anti-establishment political rhetoric that undercuts the policies and political perspective of the Qatari state. Rather, the discourse is a manifestation of a rhetorical strategy that allows Al Jazeera to bolster Qatari policies in three ways: a) by initially identifying itself superficially with the viewers' "radicalism," in order to b) subtly deflect from itself the radical precepts of the two most popular ideologies—Arab nationalism and jihadist Islamism, or from any radical program of action that they may inspire—and c) by creating a need for, and orienting the audiences' "radicalism" towards, an alternative political ideology that fits with the policies and strategic interests of the Qatari government.

Concomitantly, I also argue that the same rhetorical strategy implies an effort by Al Jazeera to make Arab viewers identify with a new paradigm of an Arab state that Qatar epitomizes—a democratizing, self-reforming state that meets much of the expectations of the Arab masses and could, thus, replace both radical Arab regimes, such as Syria and Iraq, and unpopular moderate, pro-Western Arab regimes, such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority. In other words, Al Jazeera becomes a means of reinventing, not challenging, Arab autocracy.

Due to space restrictions, I will limit myself here to analyzing the lengthy introductory remarks of Faisal al-Qasim, focusing my analysis on two subjects over which there is a deep divide between the stance of the Qatari government and the stance of Arab populations at large: the

Arab-Israeli conflict and the question of Arab unity and its ideological incubator—Arab nationalism.

“The Opposite Direction”: Whose Direction?

The rhetorical questions of the passage I previously quoted (America is Israel, isn't it? Israel is America, isn't it? [...]) were not delivered by a radical Islamist, or by a zealous Arab nationalist orator addressing an Arab nationalist audience in a convention sponsored by an Arab nationalist regime like Ba`thist Syria or formerly Ba`thist Iraq. Rather, these rhetorical questions were delivered by Dr. Faisal al-Qasim in the June 12, 2000 broadcast of his weekly live debate talk show, *al-Ittijaah al-Mu'aakis*, “The Opposite Direction” (OD, henceforth), the program that almost overnight rendered Al Jazeera an Arab household name.

Rhetorical questions are the primary characteristic of al-Qasim's political rhetoric. By definition, a rhetorical question is a statement of fact. Facts such as “America is Israel, isn't it? Israel is America, isn't it?” identify al-Qasim emotionally and enthymematically with the anti-Arab establishment, anti-Israel, anti-U.S. attitudes of Arab audiences. But his rhetorical questions *do* more than unite him with the viewing audience; they also manifest a rhetorical strategy that positions al-Qasim in a place from which he can a) undermine the beliefs and attitude of the audiences without running the risk of alienating them, and b) trigger an identification between the audiences and the policies and political perspective of the Qatari government without patronizing it. This outcome is a concomitant of a subtle transition, induced by al-Qasim, from one line of reasoning—endorsed by the majority of the viewers—to another, which is conducive to the interests and policies of the Qatari government. Therefore, to fully understand the implications of al-Qasim's political rhetoric, one must penetrate its surface meaning in order to isolate the new lines of reasoning towards which al-Qasim nudges the viewing audience gently and firmly.

The induced shift from one line of reasoning to another is discernible at both the broad level of OD in general, and at a narrow level manifest in al-Qasim's discourse in any single broadcast of OD. At both levels, al-Qasim's political oratory creates a mental context that favors the Qatari pragmatic policies without belittling the beliefs and attitudes of the anti-establishment Arab masses.

Broadly speaking, Al Jazeera, epitomized by al-Qasim's political rhetoric, exemplifies what Machiavelli refers to in *The Prince* as “great enterprises” that give rare examples of a new prince seeking to stabilize his rule (1985, p. 87). As a “great enterprise,” Al Jazeera, which offers the Arab masses an unprecedented level of free speech and, apparently, a drastically different form of pan-Arab TV channel, identifies the Arab audiences indirectly with the new Qatari emir by setting him apart from other largely despised Arab rulers. And even though Al Jazeera as a great enterprise does not render the Qatari “Prince” a new Nasser, it nonetheless tells the viewers that

he is not Anwar al-Sadat or Hosni Mubarak. In the current context of Arab politics, “avoiding contempt and hatred” of the public, to once again borrow Machiavelli’s words in *The Prince* (p. 71), is quite an achievement, one that the new Qatari emir owes to the anti-establishment rhetoric of the likes of al-Qasim, who epitomizes a new great enterprise—Al Jazeera.

Rhetorically speaking, setting the Qatari emir apart from other hated Arab rulers is closely connected to what al-Qasim’s rhetorical questions “do”— i.e., create a new hierarchy of questions in the minds of the viewers. For instance, he compels the millions of viewers watching him to ask one primary question, a rhetorical one: “Did he really say that live on an Arab television channel?” By constantly eliciting this primary question from the viewers, that which is most shocking about the enterprise that he personifies, he diminishes other questions or issues that are less shocking, but that could undermine the image and interests of the new emir, such as his relations with Israel.

Al-Qasim’s rhetorical questions *do* more still for the Qatari emir; they offer the viewers frameworks of interpretation that further cast him in a positive light. Al-Qasim’s questions give the viewers a framework that nudges them to see the new Qatari emir as a noble leader who is compelled by circumstances to embark on base policies. This framework of interpretation is inextricably linked to the topical slippage that al-Qasim’s rhetorical questions subtly induce in the minds of the viewers. By topical slippage, I am referring to the process by which al-Qasim uses rhetorical questions to encourage viewers to abandon one line of reasoning that underpins their popular beliefs and attitudes, in favor of an alternative line of reasoning that aligns with Qatari interests.

Take, for instance, the questions, “Israel is America, isn’t it? America is Israel, isn’t it?” In both cases, the questions elicit the agreed-upon answer “Yes.” However, al-Qasim, in a Shakespearean way, uses such popular premises to defend some of the establishment’s unpopular actions. Just as questions such as “Who is here so base that would be a bondman? ... Who is so rude that would not be a Roman?... Who is here so vile that will not love his country?” (*Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 2) provide the audience with a new perspective on a base, unpopular act (the killing of Julius Caesar), and link that new perspective to the audience’s own patriotism and love of freedom rather than to the interests of the ruling elite, so do al-Qasim’s rhetorical questions, “Israel is America, isn’t it? America is Israel, isn’t it?” While at face value the questions embrace the viewers’ opposition to or even hatred of Israel, the United States and their Arab allies, the same questions bring to the viewers’ mind a compelling circumstance or a present fact that, unless taken into consideration, will bring negative consequences to the viewers: the United States’ full commitment to the security of Israel and the readiness and willingness of both Israel and the United States to use their devastating military power to defend their strategic interests in the Arab region.

At this point, al-Qasim's rhetorical questions create a new link: the questions that tap into a common belief or attitude (the viewers' anti-Israel, anti-U.S., and anti-Arab establishment stance) now also tap into the viewers' fears, concerns and practical wisdom. In this capacity, the rhetorical questions elicit from the viewers a question such as "What can a ruler of a defenseless, tiny, little country like Qatar do against a regional superpower—Israel—or the world's only superpower—the United States?" Subsequently, the viewers are invited to see the strengthening of Qatari relations with both Israel and the United States as *sharrun la budda minhu* (a necessary evil), or to even see it as a matter of political prudence on the part of a noble ruler who is compelled by a difficult circumstance to embark on base, unpopular political actions. The shift in audience identification is thus linked to a shift from one line of reasoning to another—from principle to circumstance, facts or consequences—that echoes and is clearly manifest in the Qatari foreign minister's declaration that "We are a powerless nation who cannot help the Palestinians against Israel. Therefore, it is far better to beg the Americans for a settlement" (Al Jazeera, May 14, 2002).

At a narrower level, textual analysis of al-Qasim's anti-establishment discourses on specific issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the question of Arab unification, reveals a consistent effort by the host to induce a topical shift in the minds of the viewers that constantly favors and normalizes the Qatari position on both issues.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict: From Existential to Territorial

Al-Qasim's discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict gently leads the viewers away from a *principled* understanding of the conflict as an existential conflict with an existential enemy to a territorial conflict that could be resolved by means other than armed resistance, e.g. by negotiations that could lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state on parts of historical Palestine. By doing so, al-Qasim reconstructs the narrative of the conflict in a manner that renders the unpopular peace process a necessary evil, and the establishment of a Palestinian state (not liberation of historical Palestine) as the only practical solution. This shift in outlook echoes the perspective of the Qatari state, as analysis of the September 19, 2000, episode of OD will show.

Debating "Palestinian Statehood"

The pre-Intifada episode of September 19, 2000, offers a good example of how al-Qasim anchors his anti-establishment discourse in rhetorical questions that serve two masters. The question of the viability of Palestinian statehood is debated in this episode, in which al-Qasim pits a representative of the Palestinian Authority—Hassan Asfour, Minister of NGO Affairs, against an ardent opponent of the Arab-Israeli peace process—the prominent Egyptian intellectual, Rifaat Sayid Ahmad. At face value, al-Qasim's rhetorical questions suggest a principled opposition to the political perspective and policies of the ill-reputed Palestinian Authority and Arab regimes at

large. However, the family of terms which al-Qasim uses to construct his rhetorical questions indicates that his objection to the stance of Arab regimes and the Palestinian Authority is grounded in “measure,” not in “principle.” Concomitantly, the subtle shift from principle to degree creates an opening for a more pragmatic and less dogmatic basis for judging pressing issues such as the peace process, the legitimacy of Israel and worthiness of a Palestinian state.

This is how al-Qasim introduces the argument *against* “Palestinian statehood” and the Palestinian Authority (PA):

Why did the Palestinian leadership become obsessively obsessed with declaring a state?

Why this excessive obsession with the question of state, overtly or covertly?

Why did the state become the primary objective—nay, the only objective—in the Palestinian discourse?

Why [in the Palestinian case] did the state become the antithesis of, alternative to or a replacement for national objectives, while in the political discourse of other liberation movements it is considered the final step in the struggle and the crowning and embodiment of national rights? In Palestine, the state has become an alternative to national rights instead of being part of them.

Hasn't the Israeli side found in the Palestinian side's eagerness to establish a state an opportunity to lure and to blackmail it in other matters?

Isn't the erection of a Palestinian state a matter of placing the cart before the horse?

What price will the Palestinians pay in exchange for declaring a state? Isn't such a price extravagant, crushing, obliterating by all measures?

Doesn't the establishment of the state mean forsaking 80 percent of Palestine?

Doesn't it mean the construction of a paper entity, without land, without borders, without control over the sky or the sea?

The underlined expressions in this passage clearly signify a hyperbolic account that identifies al-Qasim with the viewers' own way of talking hyperbolically and sarcastically about the PA, which many view as a lackey of Arab regimes and even Israel and the United States. The same point of identification between al-Qasim and the cynical audience is further conveyed by the underlined parenthesis (“nay, the only objective”), as well as by the fourth rhetorical question:

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movements it is [merely] considered the final step in the struggle and the crowning and embodiment of national rights? In Palestine, the state has become an alternative to national rights instead of being part of them.

This question is even phrased by al-Qasim as a *hypophora*, since he proceeds to answer it, leaving no room for doubting his condemnation of the policies of the PA. His opposition to and condemnation of the policies of the PA are also evidenced by the stream of attributes and keywords (synonyms, in fact, as in “antithesis of, alternative to, replacement for”) as well as in the underlined *parenthesis* (In Palestine...) that emphasizes the unworthiness of the “state” as advocated and pursued by the PA. In the remainder of the rhetorical questions, al-Qasim merely expands the argument against the policies of the PA through *parentheses* (*jumal mu'tarida*) in the third and fourth questions, *analogy* (the cart before the horse) in the sixth, *sarcasm* (paper state) and *amplification* (a set of adjectives that he uses in reference to the state, “without land, without borders, without control over the sky or the sea” in the last.

But how do al-Qasim’s hyperbolic rhetorical questions invite the audience to see these issues of peace negotiations, statehood and the PA’s policies from a different perspective? Collectively, the rhetorical questions that the host raises in connection with the argument against “Palestinian statehood” demonstrate clearly his opposition to the policies of the PA. But the keyword here is “policies.” And it is at this juncture that a topical shift begins to emerge. Take another look at the first three rhetorical questions:

Why did the Palestinian leadership become obsessively obsessed with declaring a state?

Why this excessive obsession with the question of state, overtly or covertly?

Why did the state become the primary objective—nay, the only objective—in the Palestinian discourse?

These questions suggest that what al-Qasim takes issue with is not the principle (no negotiation with an existential enemy; no compromising of any part of historical Palestine), but rather the *degree* of worthiness of the “Palestinian state” as pursued by the PA. An interest in “degree,” as an alternative to “principle,” is manifest in the series of expressions that al-Qasim uses to construct his rhetorical questions; expressions such as “obsessively obsessed,” “excessive obsession” and “nay, the only objective.” These hyperbolic expressions suggest that what al-Qasim opposes is the impulsiveness, or the “irrationality” of the PA, not the act of negotiation per se or the appropriateness of “statehood” on parts of historical Palestine as an ultimate objective.

While a hyperbolic discourse emphasizes irrationality and impulsiveness, it simultaneously nudges the viewers towards a rational, moderate, less impulsive view of the peace process as a proper course of action. In this manner, al-Qasim reconstructs the narrative of the conflict so that

highly controversial issues, such as the existential nature of the conflict and the legitimacy of Israel, are pushed to the margins of the narrative. Furthermore, al-Qasim also loosens the fabric of the narrative of peace negotiations in a way that creates adequate space for an alternative outcome: a scenario in which, if properly and rationally handled by the PA, peace negotiations could lead to a common good, establishing a Palestinian state on parts of historical Palestine. Hence, by gently steering the audience towards a more practical resolution of the conflict, al-Qasim simultaneously elbows the viewers away from dogmatic principle, such as the belief that existential conflict with an existential enemy can only end with the elimination of the enemy and liberation of Palestine.

In this induced shift towards a more practical perception of the conflict, not only does al-Qasim's hyperbolic presentation of the argument *against* the PA's policies deny viewers the principled argument against peace negotiations, but it also prepares viewers to accept the argument *for* the "state." He continues:

How come Israel undergoes a political seizure upon hearing the phrase "Palestinian state"? Doesn't a [Palestinian] state represent a nightmare to Israel?

Doesn't the birth of a [Palestinian] state mean the final destruction of a basic notion of the Zionist project — that is to say, Palestine is an unpeopled land?

Who says that the [Palestinian] state lacks the basic requirements? Doesn't it have land, a populace and excellent international relations?

Doesn't the Palestinian Authority have nearly ninety embassies and consulates in five continents? So what if it does not have its own army? Switzerland does not have an army, does it?

Once again, the rhetorical questions convey contradictory messages and thus create an opening for an alternative reading of the conflict and how it should be resolved, without either patronizing the Qatari government or offending the audience. In one sense, these rhetorical questions are an echo of the way ordinary viewers refer to the official argument sarcastically in their intimate social discussions as a means of denouncing it. Notice for instance how the Palestinian state-to-be is presented by al-Qasim *hyperbolically* in the first and the second rhetorical questions in which he depicts it metaphorically as "political seizure" and "nightmare" for Israel. Needless to say, a Palestinian state based on Arab acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the state of Israel and its right to exist peacefully within the pre-1967 borders hardly represents a "political seizure" or a "nightmare" for Israel.

On the contrary, a Palestinian state becomes a great achievement so far as the security and perpetuity of the state of Israel is concerned, regardless of some inconveniences to it. In this sense, both al-Qasim's rhetorical questions, due to their sarcastic nature, imply the opposite; that

is, a Palestinian state serves the interests of Israel, therefore it is an unworthy cause. Thus once again, the rhetorical questions demonstrate initially al-Qasim's opposition to the PA's policies.

In the third rhetorical question, al-Qasim *overstates* the "state" once again, representing it as antithetical to the "Zionist project." Therefore the hyperbolic nature of the question suggests sarcasm, which in turn validates the opposite meaning; that is, a Palestinian state is not the antithesis of the Zionist project and hence it is unworthy. The remainder of the passage makes the problematic character of a Palestinian state explicit. This is quite clear in the last five rhetorical questions:

Who says that the [Palestinian] state lacks the basic requirements?

Doesn't it have land, a populace and excellent international relations?

Doesn't the Palestinian Authority have nearly ninety embassies and consulates in five continents? So what if it does not have its own army? Switzerland does not have an army, does it?

In these questions, al-Qasim conveys sarcasm by either *understating* (lacking basic requirements—land, army) or *overstating* (having ninety embassies and excellent relations) vital issues germane to the viability and worthiness of the state-to-be. As sarcastic rhetorical questions, they validate the opposite meaning. Thereby, the answer elicited by the question "Who says that the [Palestinian] state lacks the basic requirements?" is "Yes, the state-to-be does lack the basic requirements," hence it is unworthy. This is a stance that unites al-Qasim with the beliefs and attitudes of the majority of the viewers.

Yet once again, a closer inspection of the rhetorical questions reveals that al-Qasim's opposition to the policies of the PA is based on degree, not on principle, a subtle topical shift. Notice for instance how the rhetorical questions anchoring the argument *for* the state in this passage either *overstate* or *understate* certain aspects germane to the PA's policies, thus creating a need for a middle-ground policy by which the PA would treat the question of negotiations and statehood in a more balanced manner. Worded differently, just as in his presentation of the argument *against* the PA and statehood, al-Qasim's presentation of the argument *for* the PA and statehood is also based on *degree* rather than a principled rejection of the "state," whether worthy or unworthy. To emphasize the same idea: al-Qasim in both sections of the introductory remarks uses rhetorical questions to exclude principle as a proper ground for taking a stand against or for peace negotiations. By consistently excluding principle, al-Qasim redefines the terms of the debate over negotiations and statehood, confining the viewers to rhetorical topics (such as degree and/or consequences) that are conducive to perceiving the Arab-Israeli conflict in pragmatic terms. At this juncture, the rhetorical questions characterizing al-Qasim's anti-establishment discourse mesh nicely with the Qatari perspective on the conflict.

Analysis of these two episodes of OD on the Arab-Israeli conflict reveals that while al-Qasim's rhetorical questions identify him initially with the viewers' radical beliefs and attitudes, the same questions deflect the viewers away from a radical understanding of the conflict, and create a need for a different framework for interpreting it. The alternative framework is grounded not in any guiding dogmatic principle, but rather in facts, circumstances and negative consequences that are connected to a subtle argument for a pragmatic perception of the conflict. And it is at this point that al-Qasim's anti-establishment rhetoric aligns the viewers with the policies of the Qatari establishment without running the risk of openly endorsing such unpopular policies.

Al-Qasim's efforts to induce in the minds of the audience a less dogmatic, more practical understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict is consistent with his discourse on Arab unification and its ideological incubator—Arab nationalism. We will see how his discourse on “Nasserism” again subtly realigns audiences from a principled, non-compromising dogmatic view of the issue to a more pragmatic one.

Arab Unity: From “Existential Necessity” to “Vacant, Sloganic Ideology”

To Qatar, as well as to the majority of the Arab regimes, the basic components of Arab nationalism—liberation and unification—conflict sharply with the concept of a sovereign local statehood (*dawlah qutriyyah*). But, since the Arab governments, as Telhami (2004) notes, “are legitimate to the extent that they are seen as serving the causes that their people support” (p. 72), especially the question of their pan-Arab identity and their aspirations for a united Arab world, it follows that any direct assault on the notion of Arab unity becomes a rhetorical liability. Therefore, to boost its legitimacy, Qatar, much like other Arab governments, deploys a political discourse, and often embarks on policies, that intimate the government's adherence to the principles of pan-Arabism. Al Jazeera itself was one of such policies, in that, in the words of the Qatari foreign minister, it aims at “being a free medium that speaks on behalf of all Arabs,” not only Qataris (Al Jazeera, November 15, 2000). In this context, as Sakr (2007) contends, it is hard not to consider OD and the channel that carries it as anything other than “an attempt by Qatar's ruler to burnish his Arab nationalist credentials,” as a way of cushioning the highly controversial policies of his government on key issues such as relations with the United States and Israel (p. 125).

Al-Qasim, following the steps of Arab politicians who customarily pay tribute to the notion of Arab unity, routinely demonstrates to the viewers his pan-Arab sentiment and credentials, just as he boasts hyperbolically about Al Jazeera: “We have succeeded where Nasser failed; we united the Arab world” (personal interview, 2002, Doha, Qatar). However, a close reading of the discourse in which the host directly or indirectly addresses the question of Arab unity indicates that he does to the notion of Arab unification just what he does to the Arab-Israeli conflict: he subtly re-anchors it in facts and circumstances rather than in a principle that undermines the

interests of the Qatari state. To this end, the same rhetorical questions that identify al-Qasim initially with the majority of the viewers' pan-Arab identity and aspirations also serve to a) empty Arab nationalism of its revolutionary content, and dismiss it as an improper ideological framework for understanding ongoing conflicts, and b) position the demonstrably self-reforming, self-democratizing Qatar in a manner that identifies it with the viewers' redefined hopes and aspirations.

The July 16, 2002 episode of OD is an illustration of al-Qasim's effort to deflect the viewers from a dogmatic perspective of Arab unification and bring them to a more pragmatic one. In this broadcast, the subject under debate was the legacy and experience of the godfather of Arab nationalism and Arab unity, Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser. This is how al-Qasim introduces the argument in favor of Nasser and Nasserism:

What, despite the passing of fifty years, is the secret behind the great Arab interest in the July Revolution, which President Gamal Abdul Nasser led, while other Arab revolutions have become no more than footnotes in history notebooks? There must be a grand secret and a strong reason.

Are we not in dire need of the spirit of Abdul Nasser in this appalling Arab age, in which our leaders loiter around and beg on the doorsteps of the White House, and the red, green and neon-yellow houses?

One asks: are we not in dire need of someone who can restore part of our vanished dignity? Wasn't Abdul Nasser, and isn't he still, a symbol of pride, dignity and defiance? Which of the Arab leaders' names is still cheered by the masses?

Isn't Nasser a genuine Arab product, whose value keeps increasing with the passage of time, despite the wishes of the hypocrites, the spiteful and the opportunists? Isn't Nasserism still alive and well in the hearts of the millions, even if it doesn't take a partisan shape?

Aren't the Islamists, the enemies of Nasser, following in his footsteps in many of their ideas and policies? Why do some [groups or individuals] depict the July Revolution as a mere [military] coup? How come they don't refer to the French Revolution as such [a coup]?

But on the other hand...

In this part of the introduction, al-Qasim sums up the argument *for* Nasserism and, hence, for Arab nationalism at large. Bolstered by a widely used rhetorical device—personification (Nasser as Arab nationalism and, by extension, Arab unity), the rhetorical questions in this section illustrate al-Qasim's identification with the Arab masses' undying love and respect for Nasser,

and, simultaneously, their hatred of and contempt for the Arab leaders who “loiter around and beg on the doorsteps of the White House...” At face value, both the rhetorical questions and personification validate what the majority of the Arab population considers non-controversial presuppositions, the oneness of the Arab nation—implied by the transcendent “we”—and the greatness and nobility of Nasser.

There is something peculiar about al-Qasim’s account, however. Nasser emerges as a great leader in the most restrictive sense; he is either great in an apolitical, tribal sense—“a genuine Arab product” that personifies “[Arab] pride, dignity and defiance”—or he is great only in comparison to “the hypocrites, the spiteful and the opportunists” (Arab leaders). The greatness of Nasser, then, is practically cut off from what endeared him to millions of Arabs throughout the Arab world: the Arab nationalist, liberational political ideology that he subscribed to and its corresponding program of action that resonated with the aspirations of the Arab public at large. Nasser, in other words, is the personification of a great common value—Arab national pride—but not necessarily a personification of a great common ideology—Arab nationalism—or a great common cause like Arab unification.

By attaching the greatness of Nasser to a common value, rather than a common cause or ideology, al-Qasim subtly problematizes the viewers’ pan-Arabist sentiments and aspirations by presenting them with a highly emotional argument for Nasserism and the Nasserite program, but one that lacks facts. Thus, the inadequacies of al-Qasim’s argument for Nasserism in this part of the introduction gently push the audience towards a rational, facts-based argument against Nasserism in the second part of the introduction:

Aren’t the shortcomings of the July Revolution as great as its leader?

Had the age of enslavement [colonialism] truly disappeared, as Nasser foretold right after the revolution, or had it only been replaced by another form of enslavement? National enslavement, that is, which renders Nasser’s cry “raise your head high, my brother” meaningless.

Didn’t Abdul Nasser bolster the one-man regime, which was catastrophic for all Arabs? Isn’t the state of suppression, oppression, tyranny and dictatorship, which has ruined the Arab nation, a mere replica of the Nasser era?

Who passed on the legacy of hero worship and the idolization of leaders who were the Arabs’ worst evil, and what an evil? Didn’t many of the Arab leaders follow in the footsteps of Nasser in becoming personifications of their countries?

Another skeptic wonders: Hasn’t it been proven that what the Nasserites refer to as [Arab] regressive regimes are more progressive many tens of times over than those who call themselves progressive?

A writer wonders: Haven't the policies of nationalization and socialization that the July Revolution ushered in produced catastrophic results for the Arab economy up until now? Haven't such policies dealt a deadly blow to labor ethics and transformed the establishments of production into nuclei for personal gain and fatal corruption?

Where is the Arab cultural [revolution] that should have come after Arab revolutions? Why did the second half of the past century produce only pseudo-intellectuals, men of letters and writers whose only role is to strike the tambourine, beat the drums and play the flutes for the [amusement of] generals?

"Facts," as a rhetorical device clearly missing from al-Qasim's presentation of the argument *for* Nasserism in the previous section of the introduction, are clearly present in this part of the introduction, in which he presents the argument *against* Nasserism. The act of excluding facts from the first section and the heavy reliance on them in this section indicates that al-Qasim's presentation of a refutable straw man argument for Nasserism in the former was a calculated tactic; one that leads the viewers to see Nasserism and its program of action as non-factual, impractical, or even irrational, and thus to be abandoned. Each of the rhetorical questions al-Qasim raises is a manifestation of this calculated tactic.

In the first rhetorical question, for instance, al-Qasim disconnects the Arab nationalist project of unity—epitomized by "the July Revolution"—from the person of the great leader himself, Nasser. In a way, the question tells the audience that Nasserism and Nasser are two different things. Thus, while the greatness of the latter, Nasser, is a given, the greatness of the former, Nasserism, is not. Nasserism, the rhetorical question implies, should rather be judged based on the historical record and present facts, which al-Qasim elaborates on in each of the questions that follow, and as seen in the second rhetorical question:

Had the age of enslavement [colonialism] truly disappeared, as Nasser foretold right after the revolution, or had it only been replaced by another form of enslavement? National enslavement, that is, which renders Nasser's cry "raise your head high, my brother" meaningless.

In this question, al-Qasim emphasizes the divide between the viewers' passion for national liberation and Nasserism, by stressing that Nasserism is a mere romantic, sloganistic call that has ushered in a new age of enslaving the Arab masses in the name of national liberation and Arab unity. By depriving Arab nationalism of its basic component—a liberational ideology—al-Qasim invites prudent viewers to revise their pro-Nasserist attitude based on facts; facts that he stresses in each of the questions he then poses:

Didn't Abdul Nasser bolster the one-man regime, which was catastrophic for all Arabs? Isn't the state of suppression, oppression, tyranny and dictatorship, which has ruined the Arab nation, a mere replica of the Nasser era?

Who passed on the legacy of hero worship and the idolization of leaders who were the Arabs' worst evil, and what an evil?

While in the preceding questions al-Qasim detaches Nasserism from the audience's passion for liberation, unity and political progress, in this set of questions he attaches Nasserism to that which the Arab masses hate and object to, a present reality of tyrannical, autocratic regimes that enslave and oppress them. This point of identification between Nasserism and tyranny thus triggers in the minds of the viewers an alternative identification with a less tyrannical Arab regime that meets some of their basic hopes, needs and expectations, i.e. Qatar. Thus, the self-reforming Qatari government that grants citizens an unprecedented level of free speech emerges as the epitome of the alternative regime.

Convincing or not, the explicit, substantive, facts-based argument against Nasserism in the second section of the introduction bolsters what al-Qasim has prematurely and implicitly argued for in the first section of the introduction: Nasserism is sloganistic, romantic and irrational. What is most noteworthy, then, is that al-Qasim has practically eliminated the argument for Nasserism from the entire discourse, presenting the viewers with only one argument, implicit in the first section and explicit in the second, which invites the viewers to judge Nasserism as an unworthy ideology. By extension, Arab unity, the primary objective of Nasserism, also becomes a problematic issue and possibly an unworthy political cause, despite its nobility per se. Al-Qasim thus uses the rhetorical questions characterizing his anti-establishment discourse to create an alternative framework for understanding Arab unity; a framework based on facts, not fancy. The alternative perspective is advanced by al-Qasim in a plethora of discourses, as in the broadcast of August 1, 2000, in which he asks:

Isn't it time the Arabs abandoned the nationalist discourse that has caused more disunity than unity?

Shouldn't Arabs approach the question of gathering together [amalgamation] on new bases and away from the outworn and antiquated nationalist slogans?

Shouldn't the national ideology be replaced by viable and sustainable interests instead of hollow ideology?

Taken at face value by the sympathetic audience, al-Qasim's rhetorical questions may be interpreted as sarcastic remarks that consequently identify him with the way an ordinary Arab conjures and ridicules the argument of pro-establishment elements opposed to Arab unification. In this sense, the rhetorical questions show al-Qasim's consubstantiality with the audience's Arab nationalist beliefs and aspirations. However, what is noteworthy about this passage is that the questions also introduce the audience to another perspective on Arab unification; the same perspective that al-Qasim has previously advanced implicitly in his argument for Nasserism and explicitly in his argument against it. The alternative perspective on Arab unification is a

concomitant of a premise that al-Qasim stresses repeatedly, whether he is arguing for or against Nasserism: the irrationality of the “outworn and antiquated nationalist slogans” and “the hollow ideology” that anchors Arab unity.

By virtue of its prevalence in al-Qasim’s discourse, this controversial premise becomes a new perspective through which the viewers must look at and assess their stance on Arab nationalism and its concomitant Arab unity. The new perspective that anchors al-Qasim’s arguments for and against Arab nationalism indicates in turn a consistent and calculated effort to divide the prudent Arab viewers from the precepts of Arab nationalism, and to nudge them towards a more viable and pragmatic course of action that guarantees “sustainable interests” in lieu of Arab unification. It is at this juncture that a new point of identification is created by al-Qasim; a point that connects the viewers with the pragmatic, less ambitious, business-like attitude of the Qatari government towards Arab nationalism and Arab unity.

This alternative perspective on Arab unification is implied by the expression “amalgamation,” *takattul*, which anchors the second rhetorical question. *Takattul* can initially be read as a mere synonym for unity. However, since “amalgamation,” as a political term, implies the coming together of sovereign states as a means of serving the separate interests of each (e.g., NAFTA, ASEAN and the European Union, to which al-Qasim makes numerous references), the term then does not imply strictly the fusion of various political entities into only one entity as does the term it replaces—unity. Rather, amalgamation becomes an alternative to it. And as such, it serves as a euphemism for disunity or at least a diluted form of Arab unity. In this capacity, the euphemism identifies the frustrated, but prudent Arab viewer with the policies and perspective of the Qatari state, whose representatives speak constantly about Arab solidarity, coordination and cooperation.

Given this backdrop of a consistent effort to undermine and block the viewers’ Arab nationalist sentiments and aspirations, the previous examples suggest that the anti-establishment overtone of al-Qasim’s discourses on Arab unity is far from representing a substantive, liberational rhetoric that endorses the radicalism of the pan-Arabist viewers. On the contrary, textual evidence indicates that al-Qasim’s initial identification with the beliefs and attitudes of the pan-Arab audience entails an effort not only to block the viewers’ radical beliefs and passions, but also to identify the audience with the policies and perspective of the Qatari state by creating a need for an alternative framework of interpretation. This framework is stripped of principles, less ambitious and reconcilable with the pragmatic policies of the Qatari state.

In conclusion, al-Qasim’s discourses on the Arab-Israeli conflict and Arab nationalist aspirations are consistent in terms of their style and implications. Stylistically, his discourses on the two issues are characterized by his use of rhetorical questions that initially enable him to tap into the radical beliefs and attitudes of the majority of the viewers. But al-Qasim’s rhetorical questions do more than demonstrate his identification with the audience; they also allow him to create a need

for, and provide the viewers with, alternative lines of reasoning, or alternative perspectives. By skillfully attaching the alternative perspectives to the viewers' own concerns, fears, passions and wisdom, al-Qasim simultaneously detaches the alternative perspectives from the policies and concerns of the Qatari establishment. By doing so, he minimizes both the risk of alienating the anti-establishment viewership and the appearance of endorsing the policies of the Qatari establishment. In the final analysis, however, the alternative perspectives reveal a relentless effort by al-Qasim to moderate the viewers' radicalism by deflecting it towards perspectives that bolster the Qatari establishment's policies and strategic interests. In the process, the question of Arab unification, despite its nobility, emerges as a romantic, impractical or even irrational objective; the question of armed resistance in Palestine and Iraq, despite its legitimacy, also emerges as unnecessary, impractical and even harmful.

In a more extensive study, Al-Sadi (2011) finds that what is ultimately implied by al-Qasim's anti-establishment discourse is also implied by the overall anti-establishment discourse of Al Jazeera. On the question of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for instance, the channel's pre-war discourses reflected a fatalistic attitude, whether this fatalism was justified on a religious basis, as in the case of the host Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, or on a secular basis, as in the case of Sami Haddad and others. The fatalistic argument subtly gears the viewers towards a passive wait-and-see position toward the war. In the post-war discourse, the channel's political rhetoric reflected an effort to redefine the outcome of the war, depicting it implicitly as a "historical opportunity" to democratize the Arab world. By doing so, Al Jazeera's post-war discourses problematized the question of anti-occupation resistance, thus lending credence to Qatar's position as expressed by its foreign minister, who asked rhetorically: "Why should we resist occupation?"

Against this backdrop, the channel's anti-establishment discourse is far removed from a liberational, substantive rhetoric that threatens the Qatari establishment. On the contrary, the channel's anti-establishment rhetoric signifies a relentless effort to defend the policies and perspectives of the host state by superficially identifying it with the beliefs, attitudes and aspirations of the Arab public. In this analysis, Al Jazeera falls in line with other state-sponsored Arab media, whose main objective is to defend the legitimacy of the state in order to perpetuate the existing political order. In the Qatari case, the existing political order epitomizes a reformed, self-democratizing Arab autocracy, but an autocracy nonetheless.

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