

**Al-Jazeera's relationship with Qatar before and after Arab Spring:
Effective public diplomacy or blatant propaganda?**

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Abstract

Since its foundation in 1996 until the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the Qatar-based and funded channel, Al-Jazeera, was considered by many media and politics scholars as a major element of a “pan-Arab public diplomacy” and even a “virtual state.” The main reasons behind Al-Jazeera’s success as an effective public diplomacy tool before the Arab Spring can be attributed to its popularity, credibility, critical coverage, and relative independence from Qatar’s politics. However, after 2011, Al-Jazeera, especially the Arabic channel, has “degenerated to a propagandistic agent” serving Qatar’s policy and agenda. Based on scholarly work and interviews conducted by the author, this article argues that the dramatic change in Qatar’s foreign policy from a neutral mediator to an aggressive militarily interventionist during the Arab uprisings, has been followed by a similar shift in Al-Jazeera’s editorial policy. More specifically, Al-Jazeera’s “dual standard coverage” of the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria has been entirely consistent with Qatar’s propaganda, interests, and politics at the time.

Introduction

During the Arab Spring uprisings that engulfed the region in 2011, the whole world was watching Al-Jazeera. (Ulrichsen, 2014) Western news outlets such as CNN and MSNBC turned to American political analysts to comment on the developments in Egypt during the Arab Spring, a point of time in which Al-Jazeera English (AJE) was conducting live interviews with Egyptian opposition leaders and providing 24/7 news coverage in the most dangerous locations. (Howard & Hussain, 2013) Plunkett and Halliday (2011) argue that Egypt’s uprising has done for AJE what the first Gulf War did for CNN.

The spread of the protest wave from Tunisia to Egypt, and then to the rest of the Arab world, is difficult to imagine without the facilitative role of Al-Jazeera. (Lynch, 2015) However, “the transnational media soon degenerated into an arena for regional power struggles, with Al-Jazeera serving the interests of the Qatari regime.” (Lynch, 2015, p. 93) While the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have dominated the coverage of the Qatari channel, pro-democracy movements in neighboring countries like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have been given relatively little attention. (Blanchard, 2012)

Based on media reports, the literature on Qatar's politics, and research interviews conducted by the author, this article dissects the nature of the relationship between Qatar and Al-Jazeera before and after the Arab Spring. Since Qatar has had entirely different policies towards the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria, the article discusses whether or not Al-Jazeera's coverage of these countries has been influenced by Doha's politics. More specifically, the article attempts to explore whether Qatar has been using Al-Jazeera as a propaganda or public diplomacy tool. Manheim defines public diplomacy as "efforts by the government of one nation to influence public or elite opinion in a second nation for the purpose of turning the foreign policy of the target nation to advantage." (1994, p. 4) Critics who consider the term "public diplomacy" as a synonym for "propaganda" have totally "missed the point" as "good public diplomacy has to go beyond propaganda." (Nye, 2008, p.101) If not, it will fail to convince the audience. (Nye, 2008) Khatib (2013) explains that in order for a media outlet to effectively promote the foreign policy of a state or, in other words, act as a public diplomacy instrument, it has to be—or at least appear to be—independent from the foreign policy of a state. As an example, Al-Hurra, an Arabic channel financed by the US administration, has not been able to compete with other media outlets in the region, simply because it has been widely looked at as a tool of US propaganda. (Nye, 2008) Some even suggest that the United States could get a better result from its investment if Al-Hurra was turned into an international C-SPAN that airs seminars, town meetings, and congressional debates. (Nye, 2008) Nye (2008) further elaborates that broadcasting information that "appears to be propaganda" will not only be mocked by the target audience but it will be fully counterproductive as a public diplomacy instrument. For the purposes of this article, Al-Jazeera will be considered a "public diplomacy tool" when it succeeds in separating its editorial line from Qatar's foreign policy. However, when its coverage is consistent with Qatar's politics and interests, it will be considered a "propaganda tool." In their "propaganda model," Herman and Chomsky (2010) anticipate that "news as well as editorial opinion will be strongly influenced by those interests and should display a predictable bias."

Qatar: Al-Jazeera's sponsor

Qatar is an oil-rich microstate, located in the Persian Gulf and is caught between two main geopolitical rivals in the region: Iran and Saudi Arabia. As one of the largest exporters of the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in the world, Qatar's per capita income is over USD\$100,000 per year. (Peterson, 2013) According to the latest national census, Qatari citizens represent only 15 per cent of the 1.74 million population, while expatriates make up the remaining 85 per cent. (Kamrava, 2013) Like other Gulf states, Qatar is a close ally of the United States, and hosts one of the biggest American military bases in the world. (Da Lage, 2005) The Al-Udeid Air Base gained a prominent role in 2002 when the US transferred its equipment and personnel from the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia to the Qatari base after Saudi conservative Wahhabis expressed their anger over the presence of foreign troops. (Powers, 2009) The military base facilitated the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the extent that the former President George Bush told the Qatari Emir, "You made some promises to America, and you kept your promises. We are honored to call you [a] friend." (Cooper & Momani, 2011, p.123)

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the ruling Emir from 1995 to 2013, had toppled his father Khalifa Al-Thani overnight and declared himself the new Emir. This, however, was not unusual among the largest and most argumentative ruling dynasty in the Middle East. (Miles, 2010) A

British administrator named them the “thugs of the Gulf” who have come to power either by a coup or shedding blood. (Miles, 2010) Boyce (2013), a former British diplomat that served as an ambassador to Qatar, Kuwait, and Egypt, says that the Emir moved against his father because he was frustrated with the slow pace of change and lack of development of the country’s huge gas reserves. Without any warning, Sheikh Hamad, whose policies and proactive public diplomacy transformed Qatar from a hardly known state to an influential player on the global stage, stepped down in 2013 and appointed his 33-year-old fourth son as the new Emir. (Kamrava, 2013) It is difficult to understand the real reasons behind this decision or other policies due to the absence of transparency and official explanation from the Qatari establishment. (Roberts, 2012)

Al-Jazeera and Saudi-Qatari rivalry

Given the long history of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, some media scholars argue that Al-Jazeera was founded partially to challenge Saudi Arabia and weaken its influence in the region (Rugh, 2004; Sakr, 2007; Powers, 2009, 2012; Da Lage, 2005; Fandy, 2007; Samuel-Azran, 2013; El-Ibiary, 2011).

In 1995, the new Emir was confronted with attacks in the Saudi and Egyptian press questioning his legitimacy as the rightful ruler of Qatar. Al-Jazeera was launched, in part, to give the Qatari Emir a megaphone to challenge the Egyptian and Saudi governments by broadcasting programs featuring popular Egyptian and Saudi political dissidents. (Powers, 2012, p. 10)

A Qatari official said that Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani founded Al-Jazeera to use it as “political self-defense” against Saudi Arabia which already owns MBC, ART, and Orbit channels and controls the main media outlets in the Arab world. (Rugh, 2004) It is even argued that the reason behind broadcasting the speeches of Osama Bin Laden [a critical Saudi citizen of Al-Saud’s dynasty] on Al-Jazeera, was to undermine the rulers of Riyadh. (Fandy, 2007) Thus, to Qatar, the Saudi regime was the target, not the Arabic audience. (El-Ibiary, 2011)

The Al-Saud regime considers itself the “supervisor” of the GCC countries. (Miles, 2010) For example, in the 1970s, the Saudi royal family forced Kuwait and Bahrain to dissolve their parliaments because “such forms of governance were antithetical to the Wahhabi principles of Islam.” (Da Lage, 2005) The conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia escalated in the early 1990s when Saudi Arabia put restrictions on the exportation of Qatari gas supplies to Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, and Oman. (Roberts, 2012) Deterioration between the two states continued when the Qatari-Saudi border dispute turned into violent clashes in 1992. (Rabi, 2009)

In an attempt to challenge the Al-Saud family’s hegemony over the region, Sheikh Hamad tried to improve the relations with Iran, the main rival of Saudi Arabia. (Rabi, 2009) Qatar was the only member of the Security Council that voted against a resolution that set “a deadline for Tehran to halt its uranium enrichment” in 2006. (Rabi, 2009, p. 447) The former Qatari Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jasim, visited Tehran in 2007 and called for a diplomatic solution to the nuclear issue. (Rabi, 2009) Haykel (2013) infers that relations with the US and Saudi Arabia are what matter most in Qatar’s foreign policy and the Emir’s calculations.

Although Qatar follows the strict Wahhabi doctrine officially, it has embraced the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) ideology to avoid relying on the Saudi Wahhabi scholars and jurists. (Roberts, 2014) Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia welcomed members of the MB when they were oppressed and targeted by the Nasserite regime in Egypt and Baath party in Syria. (Haykel, 2013) However, Qatar was more successful than Saudi in confining their influence and directing their energies “outside” the country. (Haykel, 2013) There was a “tacit understanding” between Qatar and the MB that they can criticise and express their opinions freely on the regional level but not on the local one. (Ulrichsen, 2014) Unlike their relations with Qatar, the ties between the MB and Saudi Arabia worsened in 1991 when the former supported Saddam’s Hussain regime during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. (Roberts, 2014)

Qatar’s “open door policy” encouraged prominent dissidents such as the spiritual leader of the global MB movement, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, to seek refuge in Doha. (Ulrichsen, 2014) Al-Qaradawi [who serves currently as the head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars] has been a regular guest on *Sharia and Life*, a weekly TV show on Al-Jazeera that is described as being propaganda in favor of the MB. (Fandy, 2007; Kraidy, 2008) Zayani (2013) argues that Al-Jazeera aired leaked official Palestinian documents in 2010 that disclosed the corruption of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in order to empower Hamas [an offshoot of the MB] and weaken the PA and its allies, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

The Saudi-Qatari rivalry has evidently manifested itself on June 5th, 2017 when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt severed diplomatic ties and trade relations with Qatar under the pretext of funding and supporting “terrorism.” The current Gulf crisis implies that the Al-Saud regime and other Gulf and Arab states are no longer willing to tolerate Qatar’s generous support to the MB. In their 13-point list of demands, the boycotting states asked Qatar to shut down Al-Jazeera, close a Turkish military base, scale down relations with Iran, hand over “terrorist figures” [including members of MB] and most importantly “agree to all the demands within 10 days” as a condition of lifting the sanctions and partial embargo on Doha.

Al-Jazeera’s role before the Arab Spring: Qatar’s public diplomacy

Several media scholars have focused on the role of Al-Jazeera in transforming the reality of the Arabic media, and challenging dictatorships in the region. (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2003; Zayani, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Miles, 2010; Sakr, 2007) But many political science scholars refer to Al-Jazeera as part of Qatar’s public diplomacy and state branding efforts. (Ulrichsen, 2014; Kamrava, 2013; Peterson, 2013; Khatib, 2013; Da Lage, 2005; Roberts, 2012) Despite the fact that its influence on Arab public opinion was undeniably unprecedented, (Lynch, 2006; Seib, 2008) the former Emir had founded Al-Jazeera to portray Qatar as a “progressive state” to the world. (Ulrichsen, 2014) Qatar’s strategic interests of founding the network are accordingly “multifaceted, ranging from the global level, regional level, and intra-Gulf rivalry.” (Figenschou, 2011, p. 368) Along with founding Al-Jazeera, some scholars argue that, the other ingredients of Qatar’s sophisticated public diplomacy include promoting Doha as an educational and cultural hub, hosting international sporting events, developing luxury travel and tourism markets, investing in clean energy, (Ulrichsen, 2014) mediation efforts, (Kamrava, 2013) and supplying humanitarian aid. (Khatib, 2013)

Zayani (2005), El-Nawawy, and Iskander (2003) acknowledge the role of Al-Jazeera in putting Qatar on the international map, however at the same time argue that the channel was not used to promote Doha's foreign policy. They constructed their argument based on the inconsistency between Al-Jazeera's critical coverage and Qatar's "cordial" diplomatic policy. For instance, Al-Jazeera's critical coverage of Israel during the Palestinian Intifada in 2000 mobilized Arabs and united them for the first time since the 1970s. (Lynch, 2006; Miles, 2010; Zayani, 2005; Seib, 2008) At the same time, Qatar maintained unique diplomatic relations with Israel. (Da Lage, 2005) In 2003, Sheikh Hamad met with his Israeli counterpart, Silvan Shalom, and expressed his readiness "to seriously consider the possibility of increasing the level of diplomatic relations." (Da Lage, 2005, p.57)

Now, this contradiction between "playing-all-sides" policy (Haykel, 2013) and Al-Jazeera's "critical" coverage of Qatar's ally was calculatedly part of Qatar's public diplomacy. (Khatib, 2013; Sakr, 2007; Da Lage, 2005) Despite the significant role that the Al-Udeid Air Base [Qatari military base] played during Afghanistan and 2003 Iraq wars, Al-Jazeera was critical of the United States to the extent that the White House called it "Osama bin Laden's mouthpiece." (Powers & Gilboa, 2007; Da Lage, 2005) At the first glance, it seems that such coverage would not serve Qatar's "cordial" foreign policy, as it could cause embarrassment to the microstate and worsen its relations with the US. Giving the "airwaves" [Al-Jazeera] to the Al-Qaeda Islamists and the "airstrip" [military base] to the Americans (Fandy, 2007), however, aimed at appeasing Arab public opinion, while maintaining good relations with its Western allies. (Khatib, 2013)

Furthermore, allowing Arab viewers to express their resentment against the US foreign policy would by default portray Qatar as a "defender of Arab nationalist interests." (Sakr, 2007, p. 144) Adopting this tactic has proved that the microstate is a shrewd political player that has been able to gain friends on both sides. (Khatib, 2013) Da Lage (2005) argues that— thanks to Al-Jazeera's aggressive coverage—Doha's alliance with Washington was the "original sin" that Arabs forgave. According to Nye, (2008) broadcasting non-propagandistic content that is attractive to the target audience can transform a media outlet to a productive public diplomacy tool. It can be inferred that what appeared to some scholars (Zayani, 2005; El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2003) as a contradiction or distance between Al-Jazeera's critical coverage and Qatar's foreign policy, helped make the channel a successful tool of Qatar's public diplomacy.

New public diplomacy

Powers and Gilboa (2007) argue that Al-Jazeera proved to be more than a transnational media outlet, as regional and international powers treated it as a political player. Almost all Arab countries complained about the channel to its founder, Sheikh Hamad, while some withdrew their ambassadors from the Gulf state. (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2003) Miles (2010) says, "Arab ambassadors in Doha spent so much time complaining about Al-Jazeera that they felt more like ambassadors to a TV channel than ambassadors to a country." Jordan closed down Al-Jazeera's office after an American academic interviewee criticized and "ridiculed" the Hashemite monarch. (Lynch, 2006) Morocco did the same when the channel discussed its occupation of Western Sahara. (Lynch, 2006) The Algerian regime cut power to the whole city of Algiers to prevent people from watching a show that was supposed to shed light on the political situation in Algeria. (Bahry, 2001)

Furthermore, Al-Jazeera has created tension between Qatar and powerful states such as the US. (Powers & Gilboa, 2007) For instance, the US State Department and Department of Defense founded a dedicated working group to monitor the network's programmes 24-hours a day, seven days a week. (Powers & Gilboa, 2007) Seib (2010, p. 739) argues that the channel was able to unite Arabs and serve as a "pan-Arab and perhaps pan-Islamist public diplomacy tool." Its live, vivid coverage—accompanied with graphic imagery and supportive commentaries during the Second Palestinian Intifada and war in Afghanistan—showed that Al-Jazeera dominated the Arab public discourse. (Lynch, 2006)

Zayani (2005, p. 8) says, "Al-Jazeera has reinvigorated a sense of common destiny in the Arab world and is even encouraging Arab unity, so much so that pan-Arabism is being reinvented on this channel." Also, Al-Jazeera's criticisms of Arab regimes' lack of action during the Gaza War in 2008-2009, triggered protests across the Arab world against Arab authoritarian rulers. (Seib, 2010) Therefore, Seib (2008, p. 175) ,who is the first scholar that used the term "the Al-Jazeera effect," argues that the news channel is more important than CNN and BBC because it has changed the relationship between those "who govern and those who are governed." (Nye, 2008) Al-Jazeera can be classified as a successful example of "new public diplomacy" in which non-state actors employ tactics to "influence attitudes and behaviours of others", for acts of traditional public diplomacy are led and implemented by states. (Powers & Gilboa, 2007)

Seib (2010, p. 743) says that the "rise of Al-Jazeera and similar news organizations is changing the nature of public diplomacy by not acting as merely an arm of a state but rather devising and advancing its own political perspective." The success of Al Jazeera can be attributed to its adherence to journalistic standards (Seib, 2010), its effectiveness, accomplishments, talented journalists, and organisational system. (Zayani & Sahraoui, 2007) A survey conducted by UAE's University of Sharjah in several Arab countries found that Al-Jazeera is "the most credible out of all the Arab news channels during the war [Iraq's war], followed by Abu Dhabi TV, with Al-Arabiya third." (Miles, 2010) Another study shows that Al-Jazeera's viewers believe that their channel is more credible than BBC and CNN. (Fahmy & Johnson, 2008) This popularity enabled Al-Jazeera to be more influential than the state of Qatar itself. (Powers & Gilboa, 2007) Seib (2010, p. 741) goes even further and suggests that the channel "should be regarded as a virtual state for Arabs and Muslims, in itself not on the map but real in a virtual sense."

Hybrid diplomacy

Based on an eight-year-long examination of Al-Jazeera's coverage of Saudi affairs, Samuel-Azran (2013) theorized what he called "the hybrid model." Samuel-Azran (2013, p. 1294) defines the model as a new type of media public diplomacy in which "a state-sponsored station operates independently in routine affairs, which gives it the credibility of a privately owned station, and reverts to state-sponsored-style broadcasting only during a crisis involving the state." The study that analysed Al-Jazeera's coverage of Saudi politics from 2001 to 2008 found out that there was a strong consistency between the coverage of Al-Jazeera's Arabic (AJA) and Qatari interests. (Samuel-Azran, 2013; Samuel-Azran & Pecht, 2014) Samuel-Azran and Pecht (2014) observed a dramatic rise of negative news about Saudi Arabia during the Saudi-Qatari conflict [from 2001 to

2007] while there was an absence of criticisms in the year that followed the historic Saudi-Qatari resolution in 2007.

According to a WikiLeaks cable, the US Ambassador to Qatar Joseph Lebron revealed that the “toning down” of Al-Jazeera’s coverage of Saudi Arabia was part of this resolution. (Samuel-Azran, 2013) A news editor of Al-Jazeera said to the *New York Times*:

The top management sometimes used to force-feed the reluctant news staff negative material about Saudi Arabia, apparently to placate the Qatari leadership, however, after the agreement, orders were given not to tackle any Saudi issue without referring to the higher management. All dissident voices disappeared from our screens. (Worth, 2008)

In another WikiLeaks document, Lebron says, “Qatar will continue to use Al-Jazeera as a bargaining tool to repair relationships with other countries particularly those soured by Al-Jazeera's broadcasts.” (Figenschou, 2013, p. 27) Samuel-Azran (2013) concludes that Al-Jazeera’s credibility [which was gained during its coverage of issues where Qatar’s interests were not directly involved] has made Al-Jazeera a “potent public diplomacy tool” that can effectively influence the public opinion and put pressure on Sheikh Hamad’s rivals. Samuel-Azran (2013, p. 1308) further argues that his hybrid model is more likely to sustain because “Qatar is a peripheral player in international politics and, therefore, most viewers are indifferent to Qatar’s political affairs or interests.” However, this model along with the previous arguments that regard Al-Jazeera as a successful public diplomacy tool can be profoundly challenged after the uprisings in the Middle East.

Al-Jazeera’s role after the Arab Spring: Qatar’s propaganda

Bahrain’s uprising

Having just secured hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup in 2010, the Arab Spring was a timely opportunity for Qatar to distinguish itself from the authoritarian regimes in the region and present itself as a champion of human rights and democracy. (Ulrichsen, 2014) As events unfolded in Egypt, Qatar changed its foreign policy from an impartial regional broker to a direct interventionist, especially in Syria and Libya. (Roberts, 2012; Kamrava, 2013; Ulrichsen, 2014; Khatib, 2013) This sudden and swift change in Qatar’s foreign policy can be attributed to the lack of large-scale strategic planning (Roberts, 2012) and institutional depth, (Ulrichsen, 2013) Doha’s dependence on “pragmatic opportunism,” (Khatib, 2013) absence of domestic accountability, (Ulrichsen, 2014) and the personalized nature of the decision-making process. (Ulrichsen, 2014; Roberts, 2012) The authors add that designing Qatar’s local and foreign policy is in the hands of four people from the royal family [The former Emir, his second wife, Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, the current Emir (Mozah's son), Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, and the former Prime Minister, Hamad bin Jassim]. Whatever these four “decide will be done, for good or for ill.” (Roberts, 2012)

While Qatar backed a UN resolution to impose a no-fly zone on Al-Gaddafi’s forces on March 18th, 2011, just four days earlier, the Peninsula Shield Forces [Gulf states troops including Qatari soldiers], were being deployed in neighbouring Bahrain, to crack down on pro-democracy protesters. (Mabon, 2012) One day after the deployment of the 1500 GCC troops, Sheikh

Hamad Bin Jassim Bin Jaber Al-Thani (HBJ), then Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, said in an interview with Al-Jazeera:

There are common responsibilities and obligations within the GCC countries, the arrival of Saudi and UAE troops in Bahrain is in line with a GCC defence agreement that calls for all members to oblige when needed and to fully co-operate. We are committed to adhering to the GCC agreement. At the moment, we have peacekeeping troops. We do not have a full force there, but this is up for discussion. (Ulrichsen, 2011)

Qatar's support for democracy in Libya and dictatorship in Bahrain shows how "intervention" can—depending on the context—have different meanings. (Ulrichsen, 2014) For Qatar, the uprisings in North Africa do not carry any threats or challenges to the interests of the Emirate, whereas allowing a revolution against an ally and neighbouring country [only 25 miles away from its western shore] could encourage other protests in the GCC. (Ulrichsen, 2014) Academic reports disclose that Saudi Arabia put pressure on Qatar to be part of the Saudi-led troops into Bahrain. (Kamrava, 2013) In spite of Qatar's unilateral Arab Spring policies and continuous attempts to escape Riyadh's shadow, (Friedman, 2012) it did not to oppose the foreign and domestic policies of Saudi Arabia at the time. (Khatib, 2013) The Bahraini uprising [a majority-Shia country] triggered a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar due to a common concern that a successful pro-democracy movement would lead to the rise of a Shia power in the region and a potential ally to Iran. (Kamrava, 2013)

Consistent with Qatar's policy, AJA did not cover what was known as "Bloody Thursday" in which four protesters were killed and around 300 injured. (Matthiesen, 2013). On February 17th, 2011, the Bahraini security forces raided the Pearl roundabout, the focal point of protests, at 3 am opening fire while most protesters slept in their tents. (Matthiesen, 2013) During the violent crackdown by GCC troops, Al-Jazeera was, in Kamrava's (2013) words, "tongue-tied." While Al-Jazeera framed the protests in Libya and Egypt as "revolutions" from the outset, (El-Nawawy & El-Masry, 2015; Al-Nahed, 2015) Bahrain's pro-democracy movement has never been referred to by the channel as a "revolution." (Abdul-Nabi, 2015)

Instead, the protests were covered merely as routine events (Noueihed & Warren, 2012) and a sectarian conflict. (Lynch, 2013) A study that analyzed 94 opinion articles on AJA found that only two articles—both of them were "guardedly critical"—tackled the protests in Bahrain. (Lo & Frkovich, 2013) Furthermore, 60 per cent of AJE's online coverage of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings in 2011 quoted ordinary people and citizens, (Bashri, Netzley & Greiner, 2012) whereas only 30 per cent of AJE's coverage of Bahrain's uprising gave voice to the average citizen. (Abdul-Nabi, 2015) Abdul-Nabi (2015) found that 22.2 per cent of AJE's coverage associated the Bahraini demonstrators with their Shia sect, while 2.5 per cent only of the coverage associated them with pro-democracy demands. Lynch (2015) —who considers Bahrain's uprising as Al-Jazeera's "turning point"—argues that the channel framed the protests as a sectarian conflict in order to justify the Saudi military intervention. Barakat (2011) states that while the Bahraini regime was demolishing the Shia mosques and attacking the Shia villages, Al-Jazeera was broadcasting images of "calm streets in Manama." When asked about the reasons behind not reporting the demolitions, Bahrain's AJA online reporter said—in an interview

conducted for this research—that he covered it, but “not everything gets published.” Hassan Mahfood further reveals:

I wrote about it but AJA did not publish my story. The demolitions were shocking to AJA’s management. No one expected that the government would go that far. They didn’t publish it because the topic was very sensitive. I cannot write everything. I have to censor myself at times so I can guarantee that I will not be suspended. (H. Mahfood, personal communication, January 26, 2016)

Including or mentioning such facts would counter the Al-Khalifa regime allegations of respecting religious freedoms in the country. It would also uncover Al-Khalifa’s adoption of “divide and rule” policy, (Furtig, 2007) which aims to intensify the sectarian division between Sunnis and Shias to prevent them from founding a strong cross-sectarian pro-democracy movement (Moore-Gilbert, 2016a, 2016b). According to Herman and Chomsky (2010) omissions, choices and emphases are included in or excluded from coverage based on the interests and agendas of official elites.

AJA’s reporter in Bahrain, Mahfood (personal communication, January 26, 2016) says that he understood the “unwritten rules” of not criticising the Saudi military intervention and its violations. Consequently, he had to write in his news stories and features that Saudi troops were sent to Bahrain to “protect public facilities, maintain security and restore order.” He was personally convinced, however, that they were deployed to “quell protesters” (H. Mahfood, personal communication, January 26, 2016). He states:

Editorial policy sometimes determines what terms I use and how I refer to certain events. I know that if I don’t use certain phrases, they [editors] would use them so I would rather use them myself, so they do not change my own story. There is an editorial policy; we have to be realistic. Qatar did not want to damage its relations with the GCC countries... AJA is very careful when dealing with the news that relates to the Gulf States. Qatar is part of GCC, and it does not want to take a unilateral foreign policy in regard to Bahrain. (H. Mahfood, personal communication, January 26, 2016)

It is argued that AJA’s coverage of Bahrain was more propagandistic and aligned with Qatar’s policy than AJE. (Lynch, 2015; Sultan, 2013; Davidson, 2013; Kamrava, 2013; Abdul-Nabi, 2015) For instance, AJE produced a critical documentary film [Shouting in the Dark] that exposed the extent of human rights violations committed by the Bahraini regime and Saudi troops at the beginning of the uprising in 2011. However, the film was never aired on AJA. The Bahraini regime has repeatedly asked the Qatari authorities to prevent broadcasting the documentary. Two of the scheduled broadcasts were never aired on AJE (Safdar, 2012). Mahfood says:

Shouting in the Dark caused problems between Bahrain and Qatar. The Qatari authorities wanted to stop it, but AJE had taken a decision to broadcast it. If AJA produced it, it would have never been aired. AJA tends not to anger the Bahraini authorities to guarantee that they can stay in the country and continue reporting. (H. Mahfood, personal communication, January 26, 2016)

Although AJE's coverage seemed less influenced than AJA by Qatar's foreign policy, it is still confined by ownership structure. For instance, a prominent Bahraini human rights activist was supposed to be interviewed by AJE to comment on the documentary, yet the channel cancelled the interview with the opponent at the last minute. They instead presented the views of the director and a member of the Bahraini regime only. (Davidson 2013) Moreover, the commenting option on Bahraini videos on AJE's website was disabled while commenting on other videos was allowed. (Kamrava, 2013) Professor Mehran Kamrava, director of the Centre for International and Regional Studies at Georgetown University in Qatar, discloses that he has never been interviewed by AJE after strongly criticising the Bahraini Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, on air. He says:

At the beginning of the Bahraini uprising, in March 2011, I said during an interview with AJE, 'Bahrainis want to see the prime minister gone. He is so corrupted, imagine that, he bought the Bahrain Financial Harbour by 1 BD [less than 3 USD] only.' After that interview, I have never been invited by AJE." (M. Kamrava, personal communication, April 5, 2016)

Syria's uprising

As the case with Bahrain's protests, Syria's uprising saw Qatar and Saudi Arabia's interests converge, despite the long history of their tense relationship. (Colombo, 2013) Saudi Arabia and Qatar were quick to condemn Al-Assad's "brutality", calling for international intervention to protect the Syrian people. However, it is hard to believe that Saudi Arabia was concerned about the safety of Syrian civilians while its troops were quelling the peaceful pro-democracy movement in Bahrain. (Dabashi, 2012; Lynch, 2013) GCC countries and Western powers want to get rid of the Al-Assad regime because of his strong alliance with Iran: his corruption or ruthlessness towards his people was not part of the equation. (Carpenter, 2013) Lynch (2013) adds that, even if Al-Assad were not toppled, imposing comprehensive sanctions and international isolation would still affect Syria's value to Tehran. Qatar was the first Arab country to withdraw its ambassador from Damascus in July 2011. (Colombo, 2013) When the Algerian foreign minister Mourad Medelci asked to review the decision of suspending Syria's Arab League membership during the organization's emergency meeting, in November 2011, HBJ warned him to "stop defending Syria because your [his] turn will come, and perhaps [he] you will need us [Qatar]." (Ulrichsen, 2014) A year later, Qatar took a more aggressive stance, calling for arming the Syrian opposition. (Blanchard, 2012) In March 2012, the Qatari authorities provided \$100 million as a "donation" to the Syrian rebels. (Ulrichsen, 2014) Now, similar to its coverage of the uprising in Bahrain, Al-Jazeera's reporting on Syria was in line with Qatar's foreign policy. (Khatib, 2013; Lynch, 2013, 2015; Kraidy, 2014) Al-Jazeera's correspondent in Lebanon, Ali Hashem, resigned when AJA refused to broadcast his exclusive footage in which Syrian opponents were smuggling arms from the Lebanese borders into Syria in April 2011. He believes that Al-Jazeera wanted to conceal the fact that the opposition has been armed since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. (Hashem, 2012) The former reporter says:

It was clear to me, though, that these instructions [rejecting to broadcast the footage] were not coming from Al-Jazeera itself: that the decision was a political one taken by

people outside the TV centre – the same people who asked the channel to cover up the situation in Bahrain. (Hashem, 2012)

Moreover, in a leaked correspondence between Hashem and his colleague, Rula Ibrahim, an anchor-woman in AJA, the later expressed her dissatisfaction with the censorship in the channel. (Kanaan, 2012) She discloses:

Al-Jazeera wiped the floor with me because I embarrassed Zuheir Salem, spokesperson for Syria's Muslim Brothers. As a result, I was prevented from doing any Syrian interviews and threatened with [a] transfer to the night shift on the pretext that I was making the channel imbalanced. (Kanaan, 2012)

In July 2013, 22 staff members from Al-Jazeera Mubashir Misr [Al-Jazeera Egypt] and four Egyptian editors from Al-Jazeera's headquarter in Doha resigned in protest against what they called a "biased editorial policy" in favour of the MB. (Sharaf, 2013) Karem Mahmoud, a former Egyptian anchor for the channel, told *Gulf News* that Al-Jazeera used to "instruct each staff member to favour the MB." (Sharaf, 2013) Rula Ibrahim states that Ahmed Ibrahim, who is responsible for the coverage of Syria in AJA, is the brother of the Syrian opposition leader, Anas Al-Abdeh. (Kanaan, 2012) According to *Al-Akhhbar* newspaper, Al-Jazeera's editor stopped using his surname to "avoid drawing attention to the connection." (Kanaan, 2012) Ayaad (2014) and Abdul-Nabi (2015) found that both channels (AJA and AJE) quoted the Syrian opposition more than the regime. A former journalist in AJE, says that the channel has always been siding with the people:

Al-Jazeera could not get inside Syria; their coverage is so reliant on YouTube posts from protestors. The Syrian government stopped talking to Al-Jazeera very early in the conflict, so as journalists, we naturally side with the people against the government. (AJE journalist, personal communication, December 16, 2015)

Ayaad (2014) states that AJA's coverage of the second chemical attack in Syrian was dominated by Islamist sources and sectarian terminologies. Ayaad (2014) argues that Al-Jazeera's correspondents appeared to be supportive of the foreign military intervention in Syria after the Al-Ghouta attack in 2013. Another study found that a high percentage of AJA's and AJE coverage was propagandistic in favor of Qatar's foreign policy and the Syrian rebels. (Abdul-Nabi, 2015) However, Kelly Jarrett, the executive producer of AJE news, says that the coverage of the channel was more balanced than other media outlets:

It's extremely challenging in Syria, in Yemen, in Libya at the moment to give a fully balanced picture show by show, hour by hour, day by day, because it is moving so quickly and access is extremely difficult and that's for all media outlets. Ours in particular because we had several safety breaches and our journalists have been killed and are threatened more than any other organization. So, that is a very, very real handicap for us. (K. Jarrett, personal communication, April 14, 2016)

Interestingly, the personal, political, and economic relations between Al-Assad and Sheikh Hamad were more than stable before the Arab uprisings. There were frequent visits to each other's countries and their wives were "close friends." (Ulrichsen, 2014) Qatar coordinated very closely with Syria in Southern Lebanon after 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War. More interestingly, after Gaza's war in 2009, Syria and Hezbollah attended Doha's regional summit while it was boycotted by Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Ulrichsen, 2014). Aktham Suliman, Al-Jazeera's former reporter in Germany who resigned in protest at Syria's coverage, says in an interview with DW that the channel did not cover the uprising in the beginning because Qatar was trying to convince Al-Assad to initiate reforms. (Allmeling, 2012) However, when the negotiations between them failed, Al-Jazeera started reporting. He further says:

Al-Jazeera barely reported about the rebellion in the first few weeks. Some of my colleagues and I protested pointing out that there was stuff happening in Syria, and we needed to report on it, regardless of our personal opinions. Back then, however, the ruler of Qatar was trying to change the Syrian president's mind and encourage him to take certain steps toward political reform. When Assad did not respond, Al-Jazeera then said: Now get to work on Syria! It is not a good feeling when you have the impression that you are no longer a journalist. (Allmeling, 2012)

It seems that the Qatari leaders felt "everything is possible" after the downfall of Al-Gaddafi's 42-year-regime. (Ulrichsen, 2014) Stephens (2012) states, "Qatar thought it is Libya all over again; their intervention could discredit Qatar; regional leadership needs more than a TV station and five people at the top of the government making all the decisions."

Al-Khabar newspaper revealed that AJA's staff were instructed to use the term "martyrs" while referring to the victims of the Syrian opposition but not regime loyalists. (Kanaan, 2012) This is in line with the "worthy and unworthy" categorization of propaganda-orientated coverage. (Herman & Chomsky, 2010) Furthermore, Al-Jazeera's coverage of the second chemical attack in the Eastern Ghouta in Damascus on August 21, 2013, blamed the Syrian regime and ruled out the possibility that Al-Nusra Front, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated group, could have been responsible for the attack (Abdul-Nabi, 2015), although Turkish forces arrested ten members of Al-Nusra in June 2013 for possessing two kilograms of sarin gas. (Erlich, 2014) At the same time, reports disclosed that Al-Nusra received "generous supplies from sympathizers in Qatar and the Gulf states." (Sengupta, 2013) Moreover, Qatar's effective mediating initiatives, which led to the release of some of Al-Nusra's captives in recent years, (Akpınar, 2015) have casted doubts on the extent of support and coordination between Doha and the Al-Qaeda group. (Dorsey, 2015) Zaidan, (2015) AJA's Islamabad bureau chief, published an article on the AJE website, in which he presented Al-Nusra as distinct from Al-Qaeda. He wrote about his visit to Al-Nusra's leader, Abu Mohammad Al-Jolani:

The first thing that struck me was his traditional Syrian dress. He did not wear al-Qaeda's trademark turban. Al-Jolani defied al-Qaeda's legacy of going after minorities, telling the Alawite community - the backbone of dictator Bashar al-Assad's support - they would be welcome in a Syria after Al-Assad. (Zaidan, 2015)

Zaidan (2015) adds that Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri is to Al-Nusra "like the British monarch" as it "has symbolic resonance without much in the way of practical authority." Now, presenting the Qatari-funded group as more moderate than Al-Qaeda does not only contradict with the human rights reports that documented Al-Nusra's violations, (Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2015) but is also inconsistent with the statements of the group itself. For instance, the group has proudly expressed its support and "full endorsement" to the deadly attacks in Paris on November 13th, 2015. Al-Nusra says, "we are happy if a deviant sect successfully executes an operation against the Kuffaar [infidels]." (MacDonald, 2015) Moreover, Abu Mariya Al-Qahtani, a prominent cleric and former Shariah official in Al-Nusra, backed the ISIS' suicide bombings in the southern Beirut in which 43 Shia civilians were killed on November 12th, 2015. Al-Qahtani says:

Their [ISIS] fight against the Rawafid [Shias] who wage war against the Muslims is something we are happy about. And their fight against Hizbu Shaytaan [Party of Satan; referring to Hezbollah] is something good. But they will remain Khawarij [renegades] to us. (SITE Intelligence Group, 2015)

Surprisingly, it was leaked that the executive producer of AJE news instructed the news staff not to associate Al-Nusra with Al-Qaeda. (Salih, 2015) Kelly Jarrett sent the following memo to the staff in September 2015:

Please don't introduce Al-Nusra Front as 'Al-Qaeda-affiliated'. We have a hard enough time trying to explain the state of play without including labels that mislead. Al Nusra Front is part of Syria's rebel coalition which is made up of multiple armed rebel groups including many based on religious ideology with various funding streams; our viewers need to understand that these armed groups form the main opposition to the government led by President Assad. And these rebel groups are opposed to, and actively fighting ISIL. (Salih, 2015)

According to Karouny (2015), this instruction is consistent with Qatar's policy. Qatari intelligence officials have met the leader of Al-Nusra to convince him to "abandon Al-Qaeda and to discuss what support they [Qatar] could provide." Khatib (2015) says that Qatar has been trying to detach Al-Nusra from Al-Qaeda to use it as a "winning card" in any international resolution of the Syrian conflict. However, Jarrett said in an interview with the author that the email that was sent to 4000 members of Al-Jazeera did not carry any political "directive or position." She further explains:

In that email, I was 'talking to producers who need to get the audience's attention in 20 seconds. So they don't want to be bogged down with explaining who is aligned to whom because it would take too long and it's too complicated. If people want to leak emails that is absolutely fine but you need to understand the context. I teach producers how to present information. Correspondents write reports, they write packages, they do live shots in which they have 2, 3, 4 minutes to give all of the background, all of the context. My producers have 20 seconds to direct the viewers' attention and tell you what the top

line or the top story is backed by. You see? So that is the difference. (K. Jarrett, personal communication, April 14, 2016)

Double standards coverage of Bahrain and Syria

Even though some scholars criticised Al-Jazeera's imbalanced coverage of Bahrain and Syria, (Barakat, 2011; Lynch, 2013, 2015, 2016; Kraidy, 2014; Ayaad, 2014; Khatib, 2013; Ulrichsen, 2014; Kamrava, 2013) very few quantitative and qualitative studies demonstrate the dual standards in the coverage of both countries. (see Abdul-Nabi, 2015)

AJA's reporter in Sydney, Salih Al-Saqqaf stated in a research interview [conducted for this article] that the channel did not allow him to cover the pro-Bahraini uprising rallies in Sydney that were organised in solidarity with the Bahraini people. AJA however asked Al-Saqqaf to cover every anti-Assad march in Australia even if they were a small group of demonstrators. The former AJA reporter said:

When Saudi troops were deployed in Bahrain in March 2011, the Lebanese and Iraqi community in Sydney organised a rally in Hyde Park where nearly 2000 people attended. I saw journalists from Australian outlets in the rally. I asked AJA whether I can cover it or not, as I should take their permission before I do any news report. I explained to them how big it was and that other media outlets were definitely going to report on it. They [AJA] said, 'Do not cover it.' I asked, 'Why?' They replied, 'Please understand our situation.' Three months later, on the 18th of June, nearly no more than 25 anti-Assad people, I swear no more than 25, protested in front of the Australian Parliament in Canberra [the Capital], demanding the 'downfall of Syria's dictator.' The channel had given me a permission to cover it and aired it on the same day. (S. Al-Saqqaf, personal communication, February 26, 2017)

Al-Saqqaf also revealed that the channel did not accept reporting pro-Assad rallies in Sydney although there were "significant numbers" of participants. Al-Saqqaf [who is well-known in the Arab community in Sydney for his work for Australian SBS Radio] said that he was "bombarded by questions from people about the reasons behind covering some rallies and neglecting others" (personal communication, February 26, 2017). Al-Saqqaf said that the camera operator was so "embarrassed" about the coverage and the outrage from the community that he resigned from AJA.

These double standards are typical in propaganda-orientated coverage in which an ally to the media owners is constantly focused on, legitimized, and framed as "worthy," while the enemy of the ally is delegitimized, framed as "unworthy" and marginalized. (Herman & Chomsky, 2010) Therefore, Al-Jazeera can no longer act as Qatar's public diplomacy tool because – as mentioned in the introduction - "good public diplomacy has to go beyond propaganda." (Nye, 2008) However, the former managing director of the Al-Jazeera network, Wadah Khanfar, categorically disagrees with this analysis. He said in an interview [done for this study] that other "bigger" revolutions were taking place during Bahrain's uprising, and hence there were other "priorities." The former director elaborates:

Bahrain is a case which has been complicated for both Arabic and English channels. Why? When the Bahrain uprising was taking place, during the same period, we have the revolutions taking place or big revolutions taking place in Egypt, in Libya, in Yemen and so on. So, with the weight of the story of Bahrain, if you have one hour to define your priorities during this one hour, you would give Bahrain much less coverage of course. Then give, for example [the rest of the coverage] to Egypt. Egypt was the major story, or Libya, or Yemen. And besides that, we do not really have access. And I remember that our chief correspondent was kicked out from Bahrain. (W. Khanfar, personal communication, March 16, 2017)

When challenged further about Qatar's intervention and pressure not to cover Bahrain, Wadah responded:

Sometimes Qataris were annoyed of our coverage; there is no doubt about it. I can't tell you that Al-Jazeera is fully independent like BBC or CNN. We are an Arabic channel based in Qatar. But we have been always aware of our bias. We are aware that we should never become the voice of the foreign affairs of Qatar, or Sunni majority in the Middle East, or a voice of this part against another. We are aware of that. Given the fact that we are in Qatar, we may by one way or another be influenced by certain narratives... So to answer your question, we try not to be the voice of Qatar and I think we have succeeded to a large extent, but I can't say that it is a 100 per cent independent organization. It's funded by Qatar and we try to find the balance regardless of this fact. (W. Khanfar, personal communication, March 16, 2017)

Conclusion

Despite the fact that a few media studies examined to the extent to which Al-Jazeera's coverage conformed to Qatar's foreign policy during the Arab Spring, (Al-Nahed, 2015; Ayaad, 2014; Lo & Frkovich, 2013; Abdul-Nabi, 2015) some Arab media academics (Lynch, 2013, 2015; Kraidy, 2014) and politics scholars (Ulrichsen, 2011, 2013, 2014; Haykel, 2013; Kamrava, 2013; Davidson, 2013; Roberts, 2012; Stephens, 2012; Dabashi, 2012; Colombo, 2013; Matthiesen, 2013; Cooper & Momani, 2011; Khatib, 2013) argue that Al-Jazeera's coverage has been serving Qatar's policy, interests, and agenda. As mentioned earlier, Al-Jazeera has not framed the protests in Bahrain, Qatar's ally, as a pro-democracy uprising. It has presented it as a "sectarian conflict" between Shias and Sunnis instead (Lynch, 2013; Abdul-Nabi, 2015) and covered up the human rights violations committed by the deployed GCC troops in 2011. (Abdul-Nabi, 2015) Meanwhile, the Qatari channel framed the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria as legitimate "revolutions" against dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. (Al-Nahed, 2015; El-Nawawy & El-Masry 2015; Abdul-Nabi, 2015) Legitimizing a protest movement by framing it as a revolution in an enemy state [Libya, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen] while delegitimizing another by presenting it as a sectarian protest in a client state [Bahrain] is an ideal application of what Herman and Chomsky (2010) called "dual standard" or propagandist-oriented coverage. The narrow gap between Qatar's foreign policy and Al-Jazeera's coverage made the channel "lose its lustre" as an effective public diplomacy tool. (Khatib 2013) Now, if Qatar wants to bring back the impressive diplomatic role of the news channel it should distance itself from Al-Jazeera's management and keep its hands off the editorial policy. As there is a lack of media studies on Al-

Jazeera's framing of the Arab uprisings and the extent of consistency between Al-Jazeera's presentation and Qatar's foreign policy, this article suggests that quantitative and qualitative content analysis should be done in order to determine the level of Qatar's influence on the coverage. Further research can also be conducted on the similarities and differences between AJA's and AJE coverage of the Arab Spring.

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