

In the Heart of the Storm: How Al Jazeera is Contributing to Changing the Gulf and the World

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Abstract: This paper is based on the central thesis that Al Jazeera is the core of the current Gulf crisis, not terrorism or any other issue of concern to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain and Egypt. The regimes of these countries seem to have realized that public awareness, through socially responsible media enterprises, such as Al Jazeera, will change the political dynamics in the region (to the detriment of the ruling elites). The paper will trace back the impact of Al Jazeera during the Arab Spring in brief. Subsequently, it will discuss the socio-economic conditions that preceded Al Jazeera's contribution to the Arab Spring. It will then discuss the role of Al Jazeera in showing and magnifying news stories untouched by any Arab media prior to the advent of this medium. Al Jazeera claims to be "the voice of the voiceless!" While Al Jazeera doesn't give voice to "all" the voiceless, we believe this claim to be largely true, as it was clearly proven during the Arab Spring. Al Jazeera has been a powerful voice to many of the voiceless and a platform for transformative change. It has reported on the socio-economic miseries of Tunisians and helped spark the revolution in Tunisia after Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest. Al Jazeera has been doing the same about Egypt as its socio-political crises deepens. It has been reporting about the economic miseries of the Egyptians, which earned the ire of the regime in Cairo. Hence the behind the scenes role of Egypt in orchestrating the current Gulf crisis. (A quick discourse analysis of Al Sisi's address during the American Islamic summit in Riyadh of late makes it clear that Qatar was its main target. And, Al Jazeera is the main target within this target.) The paper will also discuss, in brief, the broader impact of Al Jazeera on reconstructing not only the Gulf and regional political dynamics, but also its impact on redefining global communication ethics. The paper will use discourse and framing analyses of Al Jazeera content to prove its main thesis.

Keywords: Al Jazeera, Arab Gulf, Qatar Blockade, Arab Spring, Networked Journalism, Public Diplomacy.

The increased number of privatized channels and social media sites within the globalization phenomenon led to the enhancement of the Arab public sphere. Technological developments enabled the Arab public to access satellite channels and to create a forum where the exchange of information and news included raising queries and challenges to the totalitarian nature of the Arab regimes. The Arab virtual sphere emboldened the citizens to cooperate and unify their voices as a reaction against the malpractices of their governments.

Al Jazeera is a valid representation of how powerful satellite networks can be in times of crisis. The benefits of continuously acquiring new technologies consist in the decentralization of the informational flow and semi-independence from domestic political constraints. These features portray Al Jazeera as a counterhegemonic force in the region, which acts as a promoter of sociopolitical changes through its in-depth interrogation of the social and political discourses in the Arab world [1]. During the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera fostered democracy via screening news of the protests and the social demands of the protesters. At the end of 2010, when the protests started to spread across the region, Al Jazeera emphasized the interconnection of

the Arab streets, the movements and the logos of the groups, airing videos on governmental cruelty in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, and oppositional opinions [2]. Moreover, protesters challenged the authorities by promoting a critical dialogue on social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter) and developing a virtual community that shared the goal to make their leaders accountable.

Al Jazeera introduced a new way of approaching the relationship between media frames and political powers, favoring the dissemination of information critical of authorities and triggering cultural, social and political transformations in the Arab region [3]. The channel operates in a manner that goes beyond the Arab media conventions, impacting not only the media environment, but also the process of conducting the regional and international affairs of the Arab states [4]. The emergence of new media technologies coincided with the emergence of a new Arab political environment defined by the leaderships of new young Arab rulers that took the power from the hands of their fathers: King Abdullah in Jordan, King Mohammed IV in Morocco, President Bashar Al Assad in Syria, and Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani in Qatar. Hence, the impact of transformations in information and communication technologies was compounded by political changes in the Arab world.

In the case of Qatar, a small Gulf country less prominent on the global political scene, Al Jazeera

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acted as a powerful representative of the country which became an international media player by surpassing the region's restrictive tradition and defining itself as a promoter of press freedom and democratization [5-7]. The reforms implemented by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani materialized at different levels, inaugurating an original path for Qatar in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context. Qatar was the first GCC country to vote for members for Municipal Council (8 March 1999). In 1998, Qatar abolished formal media censorship by dissolving the Ministry of Information. Qatar Radio & Television Corporation and Qatar News Agency are now under an umbrella organization called Qatar Media Corporation. Al Jazeera has been a major player in this environment of pushing toward liberalizing the press from government control [8].

By embracing the practices of *networked journalism*, Al Jazeera became closer to its audience as it invites the public to contribute to the news via comments on the website, blogs, Twitter and Facebook outlets and their own videos and photos and SMS messages [9]. Moreover, its bond with the Arab public has been strengthened through the utilization of the Standard Modern Arabic (*Fusha*) instead of colloquial Arabic, thus engaging with a wider Arab audience [2, 6]. The contemporary hybrid media environment gave birth to a dynamic sphere where the faster access to Internet, the alternative media, the intensified social media usage and networked journalism engage the Arab audiences in dialogue on multiple levels [7]. Al Jazeera accumulated media and political attention that enhanced its visibility and propelled it into the regional and international scenes as an important and controversial player.

The 2017 Gulf crisis shows that Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt perceive Al Jazeera as a force that has the capacity to influence political affairs in their countries, regionally and internationally. The real reason behind attacking Al Jazeera resides in the power of the channel to raise a voice that could embolden Arab citizens to question their leaders, as it was the case in 2011, when the Arab Spring erupted.

AL JAZEERA FUELING THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The onset of the Arab Spring occurred in 2010 in Tunisia and quickly spread to Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria [6]. Corruption, government brutality, nepotism, fraudulent elections, unemployment and police cruelty constituted the reasons behind the protests of a young

Arab generation desirous of justice, progressive economy, citizens-oriented bureaucracy, solid institutions and liberal leadership. The deaths of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and Khaled Said in Egypt, supervened upon police abuse, have outraged the populations already weary of the regime's injustices. The Kefaya movement (supported by the Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt initiated symbolic protests using social media in order to challenge the presidency of Hosni Mubarak and opened a way for the Arab media to take an aggressive stance on the matter [10].

It has been claimed that the protests during the Arab Spring have been fueled by media [11]. Media play a prominent role in a conflict, a large number of spectators selecting the Internet as a credible source of information regarding war and military conflicts [12]. During the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera's web traffic increased by 2,500% and while the protesters were shouting "Long live Al Jazeera!" in Tahrir Square, the Gulf governments feared that the uprisings will spread in their countries [13].

The network's powerful videos and images of the protests presented a totally different reality than the one presented by the Egyptian state-owned media. While Al Jazeera was airing videos and images of people calling for the end of regime and of citizens queueing for bread and petrol, the Egyptian state owned channels were presenting streets with smooth traffic and Egyptians with full fridges [14]. The slogan of the Arab uprisings "The people want to overthrow the regime" represented an interconnected narrative of change, responsive to despotic regimes. Al Jazeera, through its coverage of the demonstrations, fueled the ideas that every national protest is a part of a wider Arab context (of the pan-Arab ideal) and that people should fight for their rights. The strong presence on the ground, the usage of social media and of citizen-generated online content and the instant global access to Al Jazeera's news contributed to the network's reputation as a media organization that sympathizes with and supports people's desire for change.

When Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was overthrown in Tunisia, the Arabs understood that even the worst dictator can be removed from power and this represented an impulse for Egyptians, Yemenis, Syrians, Libyans, Bahrainis, Jordanian, Moroccans, and others to unify their voices against their autocratic regimes [10]. Galander (2013) [15] found that Al Jazeera was present in every battle in Tunisia, Egypt,

Yemen and Libya and it was not only reporting on the events of the Arab Spring, but it also acted as a platform for the protestants to make widely known their requests. The Qatari network provided different angles than those of Western media by highlighting the religious aspect of the Arab Spring demonstrations through videos and images of crowds during the prayers, mosques and teachings from Qu'ran. This shows how the language of media poses great significance through its interface with the political discourse and its potential to represent and sculpt realities and ideas [11]. Due to its extensive coverage of critical events, proximity to conflict zones, instinct for breaking news and daring political commentary [7], the channel was perceived as the most credible source of information [6].

When the uprisings started in Egypt, the government tried to stop Al Jazeera's coverage of the angry crowds and the bloody protests by shutting down its offices, revoking its journalists' licenses and even arresting them. Moreover, the government satellite television company, Nilesat, dropped down the live channel Al Jazeera Mubasher and later on blocked the signal of Al Jazeera Arabic, breaking the contractual agreement [14]. Despite the government's attempts to impede Al Jazeera's news to be transmitted to the Egyptian audience living in Egypt, 10 Arabic language TV channels volunteered to carry Al Jazeera's content according to Mustafa Souag, the head of news at Al Jazeera Arabic [14]. The government exerted force against Al Jazeera as the network's role in the revolutions implied a strong element of advocacy defined by the provision of a platform for the young voices demanding for freedom, opening the necessary space to accommodate and propagate their calls and their hopes. Nevertheless, the youth marched for freedom on the streets of Cairo and Tunis not because of Al Jazeera, but "because of the absence of more Al Jazeeras" [16]. The Internet and technological developments played an essential role in propagating the spirit of the revolution by allowing the youth to take their own actions. Lynch (2011) [10] identified the virtual means utilized by users to denounce their leaders' actions: a Tunisian revealed online first lady's shopping travels on private jet, an Egyptian blogger uploaded videos of police brutality and exposed the officers' names, Bahrainis have shown via Google Earth the size of lands expropriated by the members of the royal family for their own use.

In a study conducted by Romero-Trillo and Attia (2016) [11] on the ideological outcomes of the Tunisian

revolution through the eyes of the Arab and Western media, it has been found that the Arab media highlighted the political outcomes of the revolution, additionally focusing on the religious theme from 2011 to 2013 and on the terrorism category from 2013 to 2015. According to the authors, the Arab media (represented by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya) examined the role of the weak economy and social problems in the context of protests and clashes. Moreover, the Arab media provided information on police violence, Al Jazeera being the most prominent channel which depicted military and political violence [11]. The study also highlighted the differences between the Arab and Western media discourses, finding that the Arab media associated terms of "conflict" and "clashes" with every protest and the youth was related to terrorism, while the Western media adopted a pacifist perspective on the protests and associated youth to unemployment and social problems. Therefore, the inflammatory approach of the Arab media has been demonstrated once again. The provocative characteristic of Al Jazeera can be traced back to 2003 when Faisal Al-Qassem, the presenter of the famous talk-show "The Opposite Direction," opened his show with the following questions "Why does every nation on Earth move to change their conditions except for us? Why do we always submit to the batons of the rulers and their repression? How long will Arabs wait for foreign saviors?" [10].

Al-Qassem's questions seemed to have been answered through the Arab uprisings of 2011. The revolutions have impacted Qatar's relations with other countries, especially due to the country's media power. The differences between Qatar's and the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) positions with regards to the Islamist trend in the region have accentuated, the post-Arab Spring period highlighting the divergent stances. Furthermore, the military coup in Egypt reflected the polarity of the two states' positions: Qatar supported Morsi, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia backed up Sisi [17]. While the Arab revolutions did not exert a great influence on Qatar-Saudi Arabia relationship, the coup in Egypt clearly defined a conflictual nature between the two which materialized in 2014 into the withdrawal of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain's ambassadors from Qatar on the motif that Qatar provided refuge for the expelled Muslim Brotherhood leaders after the coup. The withdrawal of their ambassadors as a strategy to put pressure on Qatar saw no significant changes in Qatar's policies after the reconciliation agreement [18].

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND QATAR

Qatar's public diplomacy has always been correlated to the operational practices of Al Jazeera. When the 2011 uprisings ousted the authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak and led to the first free election in Egypt which brought Mohammed Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leader, to power, the favorable coverage raised criticism. Critical voices claimed that, by endorsing the victory of Islamists, Al Jazeera follows Qatar's political agenda, instead of maintaining its editorial integrity [13]. Criticism grew stronger after the current president of Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, overthrew Morsi and installed an autocratic regime, constantly denounced by Al Jazeera as a "military coup."

The Muslim Brotherhood, established in 1928 in Egypt by the w Hassan al Banna, rapidly became popular in other Muslim countries such as Syria, Palestine, Libya, Jordan, Sudan and Morocco. However, its status varies according to each territory in which the movement operates: in Syria, it is seen as an

underground revolutionary group and any professed member; in Jordan, members of the Brotherhood founded the Islamic Action Front political party; in Palestine, Hamas created during the Intifada (1987-1993) a military extension called Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades formed of Muslim Brotherhood supporters that became popular, thanks to its social welfare created for locals; and in Morocco, the Brotherhood operates through the Justice and Development Party [19]. In Egypt, Mubarak's regime oppressed the group and only when the first democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi came into power in 2011, the group was legalized. The current President of Egypt, Fatah el Sissi, declared the group as a terrorist organization, a label also utilized by Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Syria [20].

In contrast with Sisi's description of the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Jazeera's narrative seems to portray it as a suppressed Islamist organization with democratic orientation. Here are the titles of a few articles about the group selected from Al Jazeera English website:

Date	Category	Article	Description
25 Sept 2017	Politics	Who was Muhammad Mahdi Akef?	Akef's death could play its role in reviving the Muslim Brotherhood and inspiring sympathizers across the world
23 Sept 2017	Politics	Prominent MB leader Mohammed Mahdi Akef dies	The former Muslim Brotherhood general guide, Mohammed Mahdi Akef, has died. Akef was arrested four years ago, a day after former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi was ousted from power
22 Sept 2017	Middle East	Ex-Muslim Brotherhood leader Mahdi Akef dies at 89	Born in 1928, months after the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood, Akef was one of the group's most prominent members
18 June 2017	Middle East	What is the MB?	The Muslim Brotherhood came up frequently during the GCC rift. Here is a breakdown of the group's ideology and roots
14 June 2017	Politics	Tillerson: Blacklisting MB problematic	Top US diplomat says labelling entire Muslim Brotherhood as 'terror' group complicates regional security and politics
08 May 2017	Middle East	Egypt issues life sentence for MB chief	The Brotherhood's Mohammed Badie and two other prominent leaders sentenced to life in 'Rabaa operations room' retrial
02 Feb 2017	Middle East	The MB and Trump's terror list	Outlawing the Brotherhood reflects a total failure to understand the historical complexities of the group's evolution
01 Feb 2017	MB	'Witch hunt' fears as US may outlaw MB	Senator Ted Cruz tables bill to ban Muslim Brotherhood, raising fears of a crackdown on Muslim civil society groups.
24 Feb 2016	Politics	Sisi tells Egyptians: Don't listen to anyone but me	Egypt's president says he will "remove from the face of the Earth" anyone plotting to bring down the state
21 Jan 2014	Politics	UAE convicts 30 over MB ties	Gulf state convicts group of Egyptians and Emiratis for setting up illegal branch of Islamist group in the country
14 March 2015	Middle East	Egypt sacks 41 judges for 'supporting' Brotherhood	Disciplinary court orders their compulsory retirement accusing them of supporting outlawed group, state media reports
16 Aug 2013	Politics	Egypt's Brotherhood to hold 'march of anger'	Group asks Morsi supporters to stage "anti-coup rallies" after Friday prayers in protest against Wednesday's crackdown
24 May 2012	AJ World	The Brotherhood and Mubarak	The story of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and its emergence into the political arena after decades of suppression
06 Feb 2011	Politics	MB in Egypt talks	Opposition group says it is sticking to the protesters' main condition that Hosni Mubarak step down

Source: aljazeera.com, data retrieved on 17 October 2017.

Portraying the organization as a regime victim and portraying its image with a revolutionary aura, Al Jazeera has been focusing lately in its news on informing its audience about the organization's principles, history and goals. This comes in the attempt to offer a background on the Muslim Brotherhood since the recent crisis involves the role of the Islamists in the region. Taking into consideration Al Jazeera's "enormous influence on the Arab street and its electrifying message that Arab dictatorships are, in fact, mortal" [14], the Arab autocrats fear that an extensive "promotion" of the Muslim Brotherhood's messages can incite its followers and culminate into civil protests, thus threatening their regimes. The organization poses challenges to the status quo of several Arab regimes by advocating for a new model of Islamist politics, shaped by political participation and electoral legitimacy [21].

The prominent religious leader, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, considered to be one of the gurus of the Muslim Brotherhood, hosted Al Jazeera's program *Sharia and Life*, and his messages inspired the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamic Action Front in Jordan to propagate the idea according to which democracy should not be perceived as a non-Islamic concept [10]. Being labeled in June 2017 as a terrorist by the blockade states, he is perceived as an agitator, his vast influence in the Arab world having the potential to trigger civilian unrest. Al Jazeera's connections and support for the organization represent a strong motif for Egypt to become an ally of Saudi Arabia in the action to shut down the media network.

SISI'S SPEECH

The concept of fight against terrorism appears to be the optimal pretext to conceal or eradicate voices that are posing threats to totalitarian regimes. At the Arab-Islamic-American Summit held in Riyadh on 21st of May 2017 [22], King Salman opened the meeting by highlighting the fact that certain entities seek to distort the message of Islam. US President Donald Trump presented his country's support for the leaders that are fighting against such extremist entities, denominating it as a battle "between good and evil". Egypt's President, Abdel Fattah El Sisi, stated that the symbolic meaning of the meeting is represented by the goal to renew the relationship between Arab and Islamic nations and the United States of America. At the core of his discourse was the fight against terrorism, based on four main pillars: confront all terrorist organizations without discrimination, confront the funding, arming, political

and ideological support, terminate the terrorist organizations' capacity to recruit fighters and fill the vacuum in the Arab region which led to the proliferation of terrorists.

There is no coincidence that two days after the Summit, Qatar was abruptly facing the news aired on Saudi and Emirati social networks which accused the Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of criticizing the United States' foreign policy. The false statement of the Emir was published on Qatar News Agency (QNA) website, however, after several investigations it was revealed that the Qatari official website was hacked. The fake news and the anti-Qatar media campaign from 23rd of May until 5th of June led to an embargo on Qatar (air, land and sea borders shut down) imposed by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. On 7th of June, Jordan joined the group of countries that severed the relations with Qatar and closed down Al Jazeera's bureau in Amman. Diplomatic ties were cut on the claims that Qatar supports terrorism, maintains cordial relations with Iran and interferes in these countries' internal affairs [20].

A study published by Al Jazeera Centre for Studies considered Egypt's alignment with Saudi Arabia in blockading Qatar in the context of historical facts. President El Sisi supports the Saudis and Emiratis as they have financially and politically backed up his ascendancy to power through a coup in 2013, continuing to do so throughout his leadership. Moreover, relations with Doha deteriorated on ideological and political background due to the presence of Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Qatar's ties with this Islamic political movement.

When Sisi asked during the summit "How are they offered media presence through media outlets that have accepted to become a propaganda platform for terrorist organizations?" "Where are the safe havens that are offered for terrorist organizations?", he was clearly pointing to Al Jazeera and Qatar, accused of providing exile to the opponents of the current Egyptian regime, mainly represented by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. With the reputation of the oldest Islamist political movement in the Arab region, the connection with MB might serve as a tool of foreign policy to benefit Qatar's "pursuit of influence" [23]. Qatar's direction toward populist Islam might represent a good strategy as looking back at the Arab Awakening, the Islamist politicians gained support during free elections: 48% in 2010 in Iraq, 52% in 2011 in Turkey, 41% in Tunisia in 2011 and 69% in Egypt in 2011 [24].

Fisk (2017) [25] argued that Al Jazeera Arabic channel and its "Live" affiliate showed no impartiality on Sisi's presidency in Egypt, rather it has openly supported the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian president has always complained about Al Jazeera's coverage of his country's internal affairs and Qatar hosting oppositional figures. During the summit, Sisi's speech empowered a specific religious group to be taken as a reference in combating extremism: "I am following up on the implementation of this initiative with the established religious institutions in Egypt, on top of it Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, which represents the reference to moderate Islam, and in cooperation with intellectuals and scholars in the Arab and Islamic worlds". Given Muslim's Brotherhood popularity, Sisi attempts to inoculate the idea that a better group can represent the future of the Islamic region and fight the emergence of terrorism based on extreme interpretations of Islam. On this background, Qatar's relations with the influential Muslim Brotherhood and Al Jazeera's rebellious reporting, challenge the status quo of Egypt and its Gulf neighbours, triggering a blockade intended at eradicating the solely voice that has the potential to reconfigure the region.

AL JAZEERA AT THE HEART OF THE CRISIS

At the end of May 2017, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates blocked the websites of Al Jazeera. On June 7th, Jordan closed Al Jazeera's office in Amman and the next day, Saudi Arabia closed the network's bureau in Riyadh and prohibited the hotels to show channels of Al Jazeera Media Network [26]. This type of behaviour against Al Jazeera dates back to the first years after its establishment. Jordan closed Al Jazeera's office in Amman from 1998 until 1999 after a guest criticized the regime; in 1999, Kuwait closed Al Jazeera's offices after the channel aired a guest's opinion against the Emir Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah; the governments of Iraq, Lybia and Tunisia complained about the channel's instigative programs and guests and recalled their ambassadors in 2000 [8]. This demonstrates that that Al Jazeera is perceived as more than a transnational media outlet, it is treated as a political actor [27].

Al Jazeera adopted a taboo-breaking policy, debating controversial topics such as sexuality, secularism, women oppression, state terror, freedom of speech, religion, racism [28]. Its revolutionary media discourse attracted both admiration of the public and criticism from Arab and Western governments. Since its inception, Al Jazeera accommodated guests that

openly went against the traditional order and that exposed eccentric opinions: communists and Islamic fundamentalists expressed their opinions live; the bombardment of Baghdad by the U.S. and United Kingdom was aired only by Al Jazeera; Osama bin Laden gave in 1999 an interview for the channel from his hidden place in Afghanistan; Saddam Hussein instigated the Egyptians and Saudis to overthrow their leaders via a call on Al Jazeera; the President of Lybia, Muammar Gaddafi, made public the final statement of the Arab League Summit on the Palestinian issue before the summit occurred [8]. While Al Jazeera's bureaus have been bombed twice by the US and UK (During the Afghanistan and Iraq wars), the most consistent threats were addressed by the Arab totalitarian states that have imprisoned journalists, closed the network's offices and jammed its signal [16].

Claiming to be a "voice for the voiceless" and vexing the censors in the Arab world, the channel gained popularity among the Arab audience by the time of the Arab revolutions. Although it was accused of pursuing Qatar's political agenda during the coverage of the Arab Spring, the channel continues to generate turmoil for the Gulf regimes, especially for Saudi Arabia. The below list shows a compilation of 2017 news reports from the website of Al Jazeera English to illustrate how inflammatory the media outlet can be for its neighbor Gulf state:

The list of the articles shows how Al Jazeera denounces the Saudi government actions, especially in terms of human rights. Saudi Arabia as a funder of terrorism is the second topic most encountered. The media outlet also emphasized the economic and social weaknesses of the Kingdom and its restrictions regarding social media and free speech.

The visit of the American President in Riyadh emboldened the King of Saudi Arabia and the Emir of the United Arab Emirates to take a decisive step against Qatar, counting on the apparent support of the United States [18]. Wadah Khanfar, Al Jazeera's former director general, wrote in an article published by the Guardian that the demand to close Al Jazeera comes as a punishment for the network's role in the Arab Spring and as a method to exterminate the last hope for a democratic future of the Arab region. According to Khouri (2017) [18], the assault on Qatar stems from two major reasons: the ascendancy to power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in the Emirates and of Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud

Date	Category	Article	Description
06 Oct 2017	UN	Saudi rejects UN blacklisting over Yemen child deaths	Riyadh dismisses UN report blaming Saudi-led coalition for the killing and maiming of hundreds of children in Yemen.
05 Oct 2017	Middle East	Saudi Arabia arrest 22 for spreading online videos	One Qatari national was among 22 people arrested for 'inciting against public order' via social media, authorities say.
03 Oct 2017	Opinion	Muslim Feminism beyond driving	The lifting of the Saudi driving ban is not motivated by concern for women's rights, but rather strategic interest.
19 Sept 2017	Inside Story	Censorship, social media and Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia orders Snapchat to block Al Jazeera in latest move after Riyadh-led Bloc imposed blockade on Qatar in June.
26 Sept 2017	Middle East	HRW: Saudi Arabia hate speech still targets minorities	Some state scholars continue to stoke against minorities despite reform efforts, according to HRW report.
15 Sept 2017	Human Rights	Rights groups slam Saudi arrests of religious figures	Amnesty International and HRW denounce 'politically motivated' recent detentions of religious scholars and preachers.
29 Aug 2017	Hassan Rouhani	Rouhani: Saudis 'should stop backing terrorists'	Kingdom's policies in Yemen and Syria described as main hurdles to improving ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.
23 Aug 2017	Human Rights	Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen 'a strategic failure'	Saudi involvement in Yemen's conflict has further aggravated the humanitarian crisis in the country, analysts say.
21 Aug 2017	Middle East	UN accuses Saudi, UAE of funding armed groups in Yemen	A confidential report by the United Nations accuses Saudi Arabia and the UAE of financing armed groups in Yemen. It also accuses all parties of violating international humanitarian laws in a war that has killed thousands of people.
12 Aug 2017	Middle East	Saudi Arabia and UAE 'tried to host Taliban first'	Fighter turned mediator dismisses Saudi Bloc's criticism of Qatar for hosting Afghan group's office as 'bewildering'.
30 July 2017	Middle East	Saudi Arabia unemployment rate climbs to 12.7 percent	Official data shows Saudi's jobless rate is more than a full percentage point above where it stood last year.
11 July 2017	Middle East	Saudi Arabia executes Shia men for "violent attacks"	The four men were accused of carrying out attacks in Qatif region, where Shia groups have clashed with security forces
05 July 2017	Politics	Saudis are leading backers of 'extremism' in UK: report	Saudi Arabia tops the list of countries promoting 'extremism' in Britain, a UK-based think-tank says.
28 June 2017	Saudi Arabia	UK activists demand end to Saudi Arabia, UAE arms sale	Rights group and legal experts say arming Riyadh and Abu Dhabi makes the UK complicit in alleged war crimes.
27 June 2017	Business & Economy	The mysterious fall in Saudi foreign reserves	Net foreign assets falling despite narrower budget deficit, mystifying economists and diplomats monitoring Riyadh.
10 April 2017	Human Rights	China, Iran, Saudi Arabia executed most people in 2016	Number of executions drops worldwide, Amnesty International says, attributing decrease mainly to fewer hangings in Iran.

Source: aljazeera.com, data retrieved on 17 October 2017.

in Saudi Arabia brought a new perspective upon regional security and status quo, and the increasing influence of Islamists after the Arab Spring could pose a threat to the ruling families.

Fisk (2017) [25] claimed that the crisis bears foundations as false as the accusations against Qatar, the real goal of Saudi Arabia being to prevent the ascension of the only Gulf nation which is capable to outshine the Kingdom and to dictate the outcome of the war in Syria. Qatar's leading role in the Syrian war manifested through the support for Nusra, the new version of Al Qaeda. The emergence of the new Nusra was televised by Al Jazeera in a two hours interview with its leader who expressed the group's Islamist principles and proclaimed itself as a strong oppositional force to Al Assad's regime. With the plan to increase liquid gas production in the North Field

which Qatar shares with Iran and to construct a pipeline across a post-war Syrian territory to Europe, Qatar seems to unfold as a major threat to the Saudi regional domination.

With regards to the accusations according to which Qatar maintains cordial relations with Iran, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies argues that Qatar's rhetoric in describing its contacts with Iran is similar to the one of other GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. All the GCC countries preserved their diplomatic ties with Iran, except Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates developed great economic relations, being Iran's biggest trading partner. The recent decision of Qatar to raise by 30% the liquid natural gas production from North Field which it shares with Iran, has definitely outraged Saudi Arabia

[25]. Nevertheless, this does not place Qatar above the United Arab Emirates in terms of economic bilateral relations with Iran. With the list of terrorists supported by Qatar declared as alleged by the US State Department and no solid rationale behind accusing Qatar of close political ties with Iran, Al Jazeera remains at the centre of the feud against Qatar. The network is perceived as an instrument used to augment Qatar's influence in the region by promoting an agenda of different ideology and politics [13].

While some scholars portray the role of Al Jazeera in challenging the regional Arab conventions [3, 4, 7, 8, 14], some other political science scholars described Al Jazeera as an instrument of Qatar's public policy [29-31]. Abdul-Nabi (2017) [32] argued that Al Jazeera's critical coverage of its allies reflects Qatar's multifaceted interests and policy. The author built her argument on the example of Al Jazeera's coverage of uprisings in Bahrain and Syria: the protests in Bahrain were not framed as pro-democracy uprisings, but as sectarian disputes between Sunnis and Shiites; in the case of Syria, Al Jazeera's coverage was in favor of Syrian rebels and was dominated by Islamist sources. Moreover, following the line of Al Jazeera's inception as a part of Qatari agenda, [33, 34] claimed that one of the reasons behind establishing Al Jazeera was to challenge Saudi Arabia and its regional influence. The failed Saudi-backed coup in Qatar in 1996 urged the Qatari leadership to invest in soft power, more precisely in media [35]. Cherkaoui (2014) [35] argued that Al Jazeera, due to Qatar's goal to counter the hegemony of Saudi Arabia, no longer advocates for journalistic independence and pan-Arab debates to challenge despotic regimes, but it has rather become "too supportive" of the Muslim Brotherhood. Zayani (2016) [7] wrote that Al Jazeera's biases (especially Al Jazeera Arabic) stem from the reconfigurations that Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been facing post-Arab Spring.

As the Arab uprisings catalyzed a transformation of dynamics, Qatar replaced mediation with a more direct action [30]. Nevertheless, there is prudence in Qatar's public diplomacy, always trying to maintain the pan-Arab line. As Khatib pointed out, "Qatar's taking sides in the Arab Spring is not a departure from the country's preferred path but an example of its political pragmatism and adaptation of methods to suit the political context". Similarly, the channel's position might not be rationalized by objectivity in the scholastic sense, but rather by a socio-religious context and Arab citizens' aspirations [15].

Perceiving Al Jazeera as one of Qatar's tools of public diplomacy, it has been targeted by the blockade countries. Saudi Arabia and its allies regarded the media organization as a threat to their regime survival and demanded to be shut down, being one of the important conditions for the embargo to be lifted. In the history of the Arab region, Al Jazeera has proven to be a great strength with potential to influence the course of the regional developments. Its influence posed even greater risks to the blockade countries as the context of the regional scene included three key elements: "the Arab uprisings that showed the weakness of many Arab regimes, the sight of the United States and European powers dropping their support for former President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt (which they did not want to happen to them), and the successful negotiations Western and global powers held with an apparently strong and regionally well-linked Iran" [18].

AL JAZEERA'S FOOTPRINT IN THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

Al Jazeera's success was fueled by its audacity to tackle issues considered taboo and to shed light on topics using an openness in contrast with the daunted regional media. Al Jazeera did not win its audience through a military alliance, a political agreement or economic cooperation, but by reaching that type of abstract connection based on the notion of a joint destiny which binds 300 million Arabs in 22 countries [36]. Samei (2016) [37] found that the American-funded TV channel Al Hurra was unable to win the hearts of the Arab audience as it did not relate to the region's identity. Al Jazeera, on the other side, used important factors such as context, conception and content in order to challenge the Western hegemony on the news production, making it difficult for the United States to conquer the Arab public, thus empowering an oppositional discourse.

The editorial audacity and high standards of journalistic quality caused great pressures from many governments which aimed at taming and restricting Al Jazeera [38]. Not only the regional regimes wanted to silence the network, but superpowers as the US and UK attempted to do so as "the rise of regional media has provided weaker states with opportunities to challenge the monopoly of information on the part of the more powerful states" [37].

The former managing director of Al Jazeera English (AJE), Nigel Parsons indicated that the network's objectives are drawn on both political and social

aspects, looking to reverse the flow of information [34]. AJE claimed that the flow of information run from North to the South, meaning from rich countries to poor countries and that AJE's goal is to balance the flow [39]. AJE aims at decentralizing the news, portraying itself as a cultural ambassador between the Arab world and the West and considering that what makes the network truly global is not the diversity of journalists, but the capacity of the network to challenge the power in the international system [34]. While most of the international satellite news adopted the model of global infotainment, Al Jazeera English focuses on political news, avoiding the global celebrity culture [39]. Another feature that makes Al Jazeera different from other media outlets, is its capacity to challenge the leader-centric news through its reports, critical analysis and studio guests that address a variety of social and political issues [40]. At a regional level, Al Jazeera is perceived as a tool of democratization due to its potential to awake the civil society in the Arab world by making public the competing voices which challenge the status quo in the region [1]. Al Jazeera, unlike other Gulf public sector monopoly broadcasters which are supervised by ministries of information, Al Jazeera has been designed in order to benefit the pan-Arab public and not the government [41].

Seib (2005) [42] brought the story of Al Jazeera into the discussion on clashes of civilizations, arguing that clashes of civilizations can happen not only in the way of armed conflicts, but there can also be clashes of perspectives whose results are influenced by information flow. This occurred in the case of the war in Iraq in 2003, when Al Jazeera's coverage did not have the elements of "boosterism" of the American war journalism [42]. Similar to the reporting employed during the Afghanistan war, the news reports of the Iraq war included civilian casualties and the mistreatment of the Iraqi prisoners by the American forces, thus showing a different facet of the war than the one presented in the Western media.

While BBCW and CNN International have been criticized for being American-centric or Euro-centric in the form they represent various nations in their news, Al Jazeera English reports in a different manner that empathize with a global audience, avoiding the shortcomings of ethnocentrism and adding new perspectives [43]. Its global vision and approach of communities worldwide were perhaps the most important factors that contributed to Al Jazeera success in becoming one of the five top brands in the world, ahead of BBC [44].

Al Jazeera innovated through its hybrid nature which arises from its programming with new technologies and from its bipolar identity as a governmentally subsidized channel [34]. Al Jazeera represented an example for certain Arab countries which started to reconsider their policies with regards to the freedom of press. In the early 2000s, Egypt established a "Free Media Zone" near Cairo, allowing foreign media stations to broadcast without governmental censorship [8]. At this initiative, Jordan and Yemen expressed their intentions to follow. Nevertheless, in 2017, Egypt and Jordan adopted a different stance on media freedom, the Gulf crisis in which is requested the closure of Al Jazeera's operations reflects the intention to abolish the tenets of free speech.

Al Jazeera created a sense of pan-Arabism as it "tends to provide background and facts (including maps, talking heads, etc) and then head for subaltern events: reporting demonstrations, house demolitions, funerals, etc. which often provides a more emotional, or popular (in the German sense of 'volk') perception of events [45]. The legitimacy of Al Jazeera as a pan-Arab and current affairs station has been built upon the channel's ability to provide to its audience live interviews, investigative journalism, hot news and a high level of viewers participation and engagement in its debates. Moreover, juxtaposing a myriad of layers of the Arab society, Al Jazeera uses connotative (dialectal and eloquent language) and denotative (the land, the country, the frontiers) expressions in its reporting in order to reveal the diversity of the Arab world within unity, creating a collage of the multiplicity which aligns to the channel's principle of pluralism [46]. By merging its editorial perspectives into the need of the Arab public for pan-Arabism and truth, Al Jazeera was able to expand its capital by further accumulating political, cultural and symbolic capitals [47]. In terms of truth, [48] noted that the discourse paradigm of Errji (2016), "reflects aletheia's authentic disclosure in Al Jazeera's commitment to pluralism, anti-propaganda, and the southern perspective" (p.30).

CONCLUSION

Qatar's policy to develop a regional order, in which media openly disseminate political matters and Islamist principles that have the potential to challenge the prevalent Arab conventions, presents an immediate threat to the totalitarian regimes. The current crisis and the fact that the blockade countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) demanded Qatar to shut

down Al Jazeera augments the significance of the network as a fierce actor with high capabilities to influence the region's future. As Fisk (2017) [25] noted, Saudi Arabia has made Al Jazeera a symbol of Qatar's national sovereignty. And beyond that, it has reaffirmed Al Jazeera's status as the "voice of the voiceless".

Whether praised or criticized, the presence of Al Jazeera on the regional and international scenes generated socio-political changes that no other media outlet was able to achieve. Its meteoric and controversial rise was only possible by conquering the hopes of the Arab public for a free future. Since Arab Spring in 2011 until the Gulf crisis in 2017, Al Jazeera, despite its shortcomings, offered an alternative to the realities presented by governments, not only to the Arabs, but to the entire world. I will utilize [17] thought-provoking statement to conclude: "Imagine an Arab world without al-Jazeera. It would be a darker, more grim, and above all more silent place".

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