Qatar, Al Jazeera, and the Arab Spring

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by Ahmed E. Souaiaia

The leader of al-Nahda movement, Rachid Ghannouchi, made his first visit to a foreign country after the first post-revolution Tunisian elections. His choice was the State of Qatar. Analysts see many messages in this gesture but some Tunisians are troubled by the invitation he had extended to the Emir of Qatar. Although many do not want any foreign leader present during the opening session of the constituency assembly, some Tunisians are singling out the ruler of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, as a persona non grata. They see him as a bully who is using Aljazeera and his huge wealth to push an agenda that is not necessarily in the interest of their country. From the initiatives in which they have been involved, it is not hard to identify echoes of personal ambitions to amass power and influence. The Qatari officials seem to have found the winning trifecta for success. A quick analysis of their projects shows that they have built a project on three foundations: Arab neo-nationalism, Islamism, and private capital. The single most crucial tool that effectively connects these three elements is information and communication. Aljazeera, then, became the central piece. Through their petro-wealth, the rulers of Qatar bankrolled Aljazeera and through Aljazeera they initiated reciprocal relationships with Islamist and nationalist movements. In this essay, we will examine the conception and function of Aljazeera in the context of the Arab Spring and regional politics and the way the rulers of Qatar have leveraged it for their advantage.

Aljazeera satellite channel has been a reliable source of news for the Arab masses since it was launched in 1996. It has built a reputation of fierce independence, professionalism, and focus on the issues that mattered most to the Arab street. The Arab peoples had lost confidence in their national media, which are seen as the mouthpiece of repressive governments. The absence of independent media and the governmental control over information amplified people’s cynicism and distrust. The majority of Arab and Muslim countries have had cabinet position managing information. Such governmental agencies are generally in charge of exerting state control over the press and all media outlets. In the eyes of the Arab masses, then, “Ministry of Information” became a euphemism for censorship and propaganda.
In 2000, Al Jazeera’s general manager, Mohammed Jasim al-Ali, reiterated the Qatari rulers’ business philosophy and their vision for Al Jazeera as follows: When the Qatari rulers decided to enter the business of satellite television; they wanted their venture to stand out by capitalizing on this public sentiment. In fact, immediately before launching the channel, the Qatari rulers dissolved the Ministry of Information. Many of the employees who worked for the ministry were eventually hired by Al Jazeera and its various subsidiaries.

“I came to recognize something about the TV business in the Arab world: we concentrate mostly upon entertainment, quiz shows, drama, movies. But I think there is an important field that has been missing, talk shows and news. No one has developed the news, because the reputation of the media in the Middle East is that the news is censored and controlled by the government. All media business in the Middle East is controlled by the government. The leaders of Qatar wanted to change that; they want to have a satellite channel with the aim of no longer hiding any information.” Although Al Jazeera was funded by the government of Qatar and investors from the ruling family, initially, its management and journalists enjoyed unprecedented autonomy. For instance, the successor of al-Ali, Wadah Khanfar, was not even a Qatari citizen. During his tenure, Khanfar developed a healthy relationship with the rulers of Qatar and the religious icon Yousef al-Qardawi. He rarely allowed negative coverage of his host country but his coverage of the rest of the Arab world did not make him any friends. In fact, on many occasions, a number of governments including the Tunisian, Moroccan, Egyptian, Libyan, and Syrian ones shut down Al Jazeera offices in reaction to what they deemed “libelous,” “slanderous,” and “poisonous” news stories. The Arab regimes’ hostility towards Al Jazeera only increased its popularity among the Arab masses.

Furthermore, the Arab audiences’ loyalty to Al Jazeera skyrocketed during its coverage of the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Recognizing the Arab peoples’ disapproval of the war, Al Jazeera multiplied its “un-embedded” reporters in the battle fields and beamed countless images of dead civilians to millions of Arabs prompting then-Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, to call the channel, “the mouth piece of al-Qaeda.” When the U.S. killed one of Al Jazeera’s reporters in an air raid, the place of Al Jazeera as a reliable source of news for the Arab masses was cemented. The arrest and imprisonment of additional reporters, including the Afghanistan reporter whom the United States held in Guantanamo for years, also added to its popularity in Arab countries and around the world.

With this reputation and huge amount of goodwill capital, Al Jazeera has consistently been able to influence public opinion. Many Arab rulers had accused it of inciting protest and dissent. Undoubtedly, the role Al Jazeera played in the Arab Spring was unprecedented, especially during the
Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. Many Tunisians credited the channel with speeding the overthrow of Ben Ali’s regime. In general, Aljazeera was loved by the Arab peoples and loathed by the Arab authoritarians—until the Qatari rulers decided to cash in on their unusual investment. The recent revelations about the foreign and national governmental interference in Aljazeera’s editorial decisions created a new context for the takeover.

It all began when Wikileaks revealed that the U.S. government used “soft pressure” to influence the channel’s editorial policy and daily coverage of events. In parallel, many people began to question the neutrality and independence of Aljazeera when the Arab Spring protests hit the Gulf States and Syria. Many observed that Aljazeera’s coverage of the uprising in Bahrain was timid or nonexistent. The same was said of its stories dealing with the protests in eastern Saudi Arabia and Oman. All the while, Aljazeera continued its hardnosed coverage of the Syrian uprising providing ample space to opposition figures and replaying unconfirmed clips about military personnel defections, kidnappings, and murder (some of which turned out to be fabricated).

In retrospect, the Arab Spring was a double-edged sword for Aljazeera in that it increased the network’s popularity but exposed the political and financial strings tying to the Qatari rulers. The fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes and the coverage of those two revolutions helped increase the popularity of the channel. The role of Aljazeera in inspiring the Libyan and Yemeni protesters is also undeniable. But when protest movements reached the Gulf States (Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia), Aljazeera’s coverage became inexplicably tame. It did not take long before viewers (and readers of the online resources) saw the double standard. Amid these critical moments, Khanfar was forced to resign (although he insisted that it was his choice), and a member of the Qatari ruling clan took over as the new general manager.

Immediately after this change in leadership, Aljazeera’s coverage became noticeably different, and even the comments on the channel’s website showed the change in viewers’ attitudes. During the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, Aljazeera’s online assets were hacked and in some cases crashed due to high volume of visitors. Since the uprising in Bahrain and Syria, however, online visitors’ tracking data show that fewer viewers and online users are relying on Aljazeera for news and information. The fast decline shows that viewers’ loyalty takes decades to build, but only days to lose.

Aljazeera’s role as a political tool became evident during its coverage of the Libyan conflict as well. Some Libyan leaders complained that Aljazeera routinely covered select groups and individuals who had links to al-Qardawi, one of the leaders of the global Muslim Brethren movement. He is
also the head of self-styled International Union of Muslim Scholars, with which Ali Sallabi, a Libyan Islamist, is also affiliated.

The political role of Aljazeera came to light again when the Arab League, uncharacteristically, attempted to troubleshoot the Syrian crisis in early November 2011. It was reported that when the leaders of the organization submitted the proposal to the Syrian regime, its foreign minister insisted that the deal should include a stipulation requiring “certain television channels” stop their “poisonous” reporting.

At this time, there is no doubt that Aljazeera has become a powerful force and many governments wanted to either limit its influence or arrogate it for political purposes. The Qatari regime is very aware of this asset and they have been using it to raise their profile on the international stage. A tiny state with limited military power, Qatar relied on Aljazeera to become a major player in the region and around the world. Aljazeera’s popularity and influence among the Arab people meant that Arab governments were invested in controlling, to whatever extent possible, Aljazeera’s coverage of their regimes. The Qatari government was able to leverage this desire for control over media coverage into political advantage – favorable or unfavorable coverage of the regime became a bargaining chip in regional negotiations.

The rulers of Qatar, who have run their own country like a private business, have involved themselves in the affairs of many countries and organizations from around the world. Just to name a few diplomatic achievements and ambitions, they involved themselves in the Lebanese crisis that allowed Hariri to form a short-lived unity government, they played a pivotal role in ending the military conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, they attempted to unite the Palestinian factions, and they tried to mediate the Somali conflict. The Emir and his prime minister, a distant cousin, reportedly visited Israel and secretly met with Tzipi Livni to boast of their pragmatism and ambitious aspirations.

The involvement of the Qatari rulers in too many initiatives, on too many sides makes it seem like they are engaged in ad hoc diplomacy. Their wide networks of military, political, and diplomatic relations make their strategy seem conflicted and unprincipled. But considering self-interest and personal greed as the driving forces, the logic in this multi-dimensional Qatari blitz becomes clear. Ultimately, these diplomatic, economic, and military initiatives would not have been possible without leveraging the influence of Aljazeera.

In this age of the promise and fragility of virtual realities, new technologies, when backed by bottomless financial pockets, can build ski resorts in desert
lands, isolated artificial islands, roof-top golf courses, and endless shopping malls. From tiny offices in Doha, Al Jazeera, as a pet project of the rulers of Qatar, projected itself around the world in style and grandeur, causing fear and paranoia in the hearts and minds of many Arab dictators. The sudden rise of Al Jazeera was matched only by its swift loss of credibility when the Emirs decided to reclaim their prized creation.

Ultimately, however, the Qatari rulers, too, will realize that they are grasping the wind. The end of an independent Al Jazeera will be a traumatizing blow to the Arab street. The Arab masses may revert to their default position for finding reliable sources of information. They will, once again, follow the official media to learn about events but read between the lines for the truth. Alternatively, they may work harder to find and support independent, but financially struggling, voices of bloggers and YouTubers for critical information.

As for the satellite television stations, we must recognize the unfortunate trend of disappearing independent journalism. Wealthy authoritarian regimes are reasserting their control over the means of communication and consolidating the tools of power and influence. This can only negatively impact peoples’ access to information, the cornerstone for the founding of civil society and responsible citizenry.

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