

CHAPTER 2

ARAB MEDIA AND INTERSTATE CONFLICT: QATAR VS. SAUDI ARABIA

Arab media is not shaped merely by an East vs. West conflict, which one might infer from the level of apparent anti-Americanism in Arab media programming. More importantly, it is driven by intra-regional conflicts, including rivalries between state actors, such as Egypt vs. Saudi Arabia, and more recently Saudi Arabia vs. Qatar and Syria vs. Lebanon, or even Morocco vs. Algeria. It is also susceptible to influence by political conflict within the state, as the case of Lebanon demonstrates in Chapter 3. This chapter presents an example of such rivalries, namely that between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which pronounces itself in a less-than-subtle battle between the Qatari-government-owned Al-Jazeera and Saudi-sponsored media like Al-Arabiya. One has to look only at Al-Jazeera's documentaries against the Saudi royal family and Saudi media response to them to appreciate the point.

Media institutions are natural products of the societies in which they take form. When media institutions, laws, and practices do not reflect the societies in which they are produced, they appear like children that do not resemble their parents; doubts about their legitimacy abound. If we look at the Arab world, we find authoritarian regimes like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, semi-authoritarian regimes like Egypt and Kuwait, semi-democratic but feudal regimes like Lebanon, and outright totalitarian regimes such as Syria. Yet from this region, the Al-Jazeera news network and Al-Arabiya satellite station seem to project a "free media." How can an authoritarian political order give birth to independent and free news channels? Is it possible or even justifiable to call Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera free and independent news channels? Are these channels legitimate expressions of their own societies? These are the questions that I try to answer in this chapter. My analysis is based on watching Al-Jazeera since its inception in 1996, and visiting its headquarters in Doha in 1997. I have interviewed many of the journalists who work there. It is also based on watching Al-Arabiya for the past two years, as well as on my participation as a frequent guest/commentator on both channels. In other words, my analysis is based on what anthropologists call "participant observation" as well as on analysis of programming and interviews with media professionals.

My main argument in this book has been that the Arab media is political and that we cannot understand it outside the historical, social, and political context in which it operates.¹ Through thick description and in-depth analysis of the political context and news coverage of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, I will try to explore the relationship between these satellite channels and the political and social order that produced them. I will also discuss the financial relationship between the two channels and the political regimes of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The question here becomes "Are these channels indeed independent or are they mere tools in the intra-state conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar?"

We cannot understand the rise of Saudi and Qatari media without addressing the changes in the political landscape of the Arab world as a whole. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya do not make commercial sense. They are losing enterprises. This being so, why do Saudi Arabia and Qatar spend all this money on them? Clearly, we cannot hope to understand these channels without understanding the motives of the states and regimes that finance them. To understand these motives we need to place them in the context of the historical evolution of the Arab media as instruments of power for Arab governments.

From Sawt Al-Arab to Al-Jazeera to Star Wars

As newly independent Arab states in the 1950s and 1960s tried to define themselves in the postcolonial era, the main role of their media became the consolidation of national identity, mobilizing people in support of the new regimes, and fashioning their own brands of Arab nationalism. The postcolonial media were used to legitimize the rule of the new indigenous regimes. The definition of Arab identity and Arab nationalism was essentially a battlefield between various centers of power.² The competition concerning who had the right to define what was Arab and what was not was reflected in media debates. For example, Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser wanted an Arab identity fashioned after his own 1952 revolution and dominated by Egypt. In the Levant, the Ba'ith party, with both its Syrian and Iraqi wings, wanted to define Arab identity in its own way. Finally, the Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia wanted to define Arab identity with an Islamic color. This battle over the definition of Arab identity was in a sense a manifestation of an Arab Cold War that was brewing underneath the surface. From the very beginning media were transnational by nature; whatever the differences in spoken Arabic, a common educated tongue made it easy to spread ideas among elites. It is in this context that Radio Sawt Al-Arab (Voice of the Arab) emerged as Nasser's main tool to define the content of Arab nationalism.³

Sawt Al-Arab was founded by Nasser on July 4, 1953. It set the context for the development of media in the Middle East to the present day. At a time

when illiteracy was common and information was passed on orally, radio was the perfect tool for reaching and influencing the masses.⁴ Nasser was a revered figure of anticolonialism whose message many Arabs at the time were well disposed to listening to. He used the state-owned radio station to promote his policies both domestically and across the region. Sawt Al-Arab is often remembered as an influential weapon that galvanized the Arab masses, arousing Arab nationalist sentiments both in Egypt and throughout the Arab countries. It marked the real beginning of media politics in the Arab world.

The political function of Sawt Al-Arab during Nasser's reign was threefold. First, the regime used it to gain legitimacy among the Egyptian public and to mobilize support for his revolution. He also used it to rally the Arabs in support of his brand of Arab nationalism. By playing up the theme of foreign hegemony and the oppression of Palestinians by the "Zionist Entity," Sawt Al-Arab boosted the popularity of Nasser. The language of the station used the rhetoric of Arab dignity and honor, two very dominant themes in Nasser's speeches that gained him greater support among the Arab masses both at home and abroad. Sawt Al-Arab was instrumental in Nasser's efforts to solidify support for his anti-Israeli and anti-Western stances.

Second, Nasser used Sawt Al-Arab to settle scores with Arab leaders who challenged Egypt's regional hegemonic ambitions. Egyptian commentator Ahmad Said, whose name was synonymous with Sawt Al-Arab, frequently vilified Nasser's enemies on air. The conservative regimes of the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, were often the target of these attacks. For instance, Saudi Arabia came under sharp attack from Sawt Al-Arab during the Yemeni civil war, in which Egypt and Saudi Arabia supported opposing factions. Similarly, the station provoked anti-regime sentiments in Jordan during a power struggle between King Hussein and pro-Nasser elements within his government. Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba also became a target for Sawt Al-Arab when he called on Arabs to accept the division of Palestine into two states in accordance with the 1947 UN partition plan.⁵

A third function of Sawt Al-Arab and all of Nasser's media broadcasting was to redirect peoples' anger away from the failure of the policies of Nasser's regime toward an outside force beyond their reach and beyond national boundaries. Thus, instead of blaming Nasser for the deteriorating conditions that prevailed in Egypt at that time, media commentators designated the West as the main source of all the ills that had befallen Egyptian society, and by extension Arab society at large. Sawt Al-Arab's message dominated the airwaves of the Arab world. The station, armed with the cultural products of Egypt, especially the songs of the Arab diva, Umm Kulthum, and the Arab Elvis, Abdul Halim Hafiz, captured the hearts and minds of Arab youth.⁶ The Quran was recited on air in the sweet voice of Sheikh Abdul Baseer Abdul Samad. It was a fantastic mix of songs, the

Quran, and nationalist rhetoric, that represented a serious threat to those who adopted a different worldview from that of Nasser. Saudi Arabia's King Faisal was Nasser's main challenger.

The Rise of Islamism and the Power of the Saudi Media

In 1967, Israel dealt Nasser's regime a very heavy blow. Israeli armies defeated the Arab armies of four countries in the Six Day War. As Arab armies were experiencing humiliating defeats at the hands of the Israeli army, Sawt Al-Arab continued to report on fictional military victories.⁷ When people learned the truth about the magnitude of the defeat, this breach of trust created a chasm between Sawt Al-Arab and its audience. As people's faith in Arab nationalism and the Nasserite vision faded away, so did their interest in Sawt Al-Arab. One idea that dominated the Arab world after the defeat of 1967 was that Israel's religious piety, not its technological or military superiority, led to its victory over the Arabs. Thus, the remedy proposed was that for the Arabs to thrive and win the battle against their enemies, they had to return to the teachings of God. The media promoted this message: the Israelis won because they were closer to their God. If we are to win, we must emulate them. There was no mention of technological superiority or a better trained army or battle plans. It was all about God. The media of the Arab world at the time promoted symbols of this newly discovered religiosity. Men were shown on TV dressed in jallabiyas (a white Saudi style robe) to go to their Friday prayers. President Sadat himself adopted this "Islamic" dress during Friday prayers.⁸ He even asked the media to refer to him as al-Raiyyis al-Mumin ("The Believer President"), echoing the traditional Islamic title "Commander of the Faithful."

Media during this time, especially audiovisual media, delved into a new entertainment genre: the historical drama. These soap opera-like programs narrated the lives of Muslims during the glorious days of Islam. They made use of the new atmosphere of piety and the domains of Islam as a symbols of the collectivity. They also had interregional effects. In these shows, the attire approximated to that of the Gulf dress and the Arabic dialect moved away from the previously dominant Cairo dialect and closer to the dialect of the Gulf region, especially that of Saudi Arabia. We must remember that many workers from all over the Arab world had started to work in the Gulf due to the oil boom. They became familiarized with the habits and customs of the people of the Gulf. These traditional habits and customs were presented as authentically Islamic back home,⁹ echoing the messages of the historical dramas. Gradually, Islamism started to take hold in most Arab societies.

In addition, a mix of Arab nationalism and Islamism came to dominate the airwaves. A new brand of Islamism emerged with the victory of Khomeini's revolution in Iran in 1979. The Iranian revolution was all about media. Everything was reported live on TV. The Arabs became more

enthusiastic about their own brand of Islam when they saw the seat of Islam being moved from the lands of the Arabs to Persian land. Arab Islamism was not, as conventional wisdom has it, supportive of Khomeini. It was instead a response to what was seen as a Persian bid to take away the seat of Islam from its traditional place in Arabia, making Persia the new Islamic center of gravity.

The war was still between the traditional regional centers of power: Egypt, Persia, and Arabia. In the modern-day language of geopolitics, it was a battle for hegemony among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. On the Arab front, Saudi Arabia asserted its dominance over Egypt, at least in the realm of media and finance. Saudi Arabia later enlisted Egypt and Iraq and the rest of the Arabs to battle the Persian bid for dominance of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, armed with its particular brand of Islam and with oil money, became the center of Arab politics.¹⁰ This trend was advanced by the increase in Saudi revenues, thanks to the oil boom of the 1970s.

Islamism as an ideology was further consolidated by the Arab victory over Israel in 1973.¹¹ Indeed, with a return to God Arabs could win; that was the message of the 1970s that dominated Arab media. Islamism as a viable ideology seemed to endure. In an effort to maintain the momentum of political Islamism, Saudi Arabia, as the self-designated seat of Islam, developed an elaborate media strategy to consolidate its position in Arab politics and to further undermine what remained of Nasser's Arab nationalism. As a result, throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, petro-dollars dominated the political scene and fashioned a new Arab imagination. The mix of Islam and oil money was Saudi Arabia's main tool to capture the hearts and minds of the Arab peoples.

Having observed and witnessed first-hand the power of the media, as illustrated by the success of Sawt Al-Arab, Saudi Arabia emulated Nasser's strategy by using the media to drive its own political objectives. Saudi-dominated media outlets include newspapers such as *Asparq Al-Awsat* (established in 1978), and *Al-Hayat* (a Lebanese newspaper bought by Saudi Prince Khaled bin Sultran in 1988), magazines such as *Al-Majalla*, and satellite television channels like the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), which was launched in 1991. All of these outlets are based in London and are completely or partially owned by members of the Saudi royal family.¹²

The case of Arab Radio and Television (ART) illustrates Saudi Arabia's post-1967 quest for hegemony both in regional politics and in the world of Arab media. Take the pressure ART exerted on Arab governments by having exclusive rights to the World Cup in 2006. Governments and ministries of information throughout the Arab world were forced to put giant TV screens in the main squares to assuage their angry publics. Heads of states pleaded with Sheikh Kamel to let them watch the semifinal and final games free of cost. I was told that Kamel promised President Mubarak that he would give the two final games to Egyptian terrestrial TV free of cost. Of course Kamel would have got something in return. The point

here is that Sheikh Saleh Kamel, a Saudi businessman, deals at the level of heads of states because of his media empire. Sheikh Saleh Kamel is also a proxy for the Saudi ruling elite. His regional influence translates to Saudi regional influence.

The story of ART started in 1993 when Saleh Kamel, a wealthy Saudi entrepreneur, joined forces with Saudi Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal¹³ to form ART, which has its main offices in Rome, Italy. ART is a group of television and radio channels broadcasting a mix of entertainment, news, and religious shows. Saleh Kamel was proud to announce, "All of these [channels] are 100 percent in conformity with Islamic values."¹⁴ ART, although based outside Saudi Arabia, follows censorship rule similar to those of the official Saudi terrestrial television programming, which ban "criticism of religion, political systems or those in authority and forbade scenes showing smoking, dancing, consumption of alcohol, gambling, crime, non-Muslim religious symbols or places of worship, female singers or sports-women, unmarried couples alone together or people of the opposite sex showing affection for each other."¹⁵ Sheikh Kamel's commitment to what he views as Islam-friendly television programming was symbolized by his decision to launch Iqra, "a comprehensive Islamic Arab channel, which presents a variety of programs covering religious, cultural, social, political, economic and recreational aspects of life."¹⁶ Iraq is seen by Arab liberal intellectuals as a xenophobic television station. One Arab writer dubbed it "Ikrah," Arabic for hate. He accuses the channel of putting out programming that promotes hatred of non-Muslims.¹⁷ The promotion of Saudi Islamism was clearly at the heart of the ART media project.

Like most of the other publications and television channels noted above, throughout its 12 years of existence, ART was anything but a profitable venture. Arabic *Forbes* reported recently that it was only in 2002 that ART was able to balance its books. Having poured in \$250 million to add four more channels to the ART package without seeing an increase in advertising revenue, Kamel and Bin Talal were evidently not interested in running a profit-generating media venture. Hence, an invisible agenda must have guided their costly investment, and as the above discussion illustrates, a glance at the history of media politics in the Arab world suggests that promoting Saudi values, and by default hegemony, was at the top of this agenda. This is not to say, however, that Saudi Arabia's strategy to boost its political fortunes with government-backed media has encountered no resistance.

Saddam Hussein's Invasion of Kuwait and the Rise of Al-Jazeera and MBC

Even after the decline of Nasser's secular nationalism following the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 war, two Arab nationalist regimes of a Ba'hist hue did not automatically concede to Saudi leadership and to the dominance of Islamic discourse. Saddam Hussein's Ba'ih regime in Iraq and

Hafiz Assad's in Syria remained the last bastions of Arab nationalism. The two regimes financed newspapers and magazines from Cairo to London to Paris to counter Saudi's growing dominance of the Arab media. Failing to assert his dominance over the Gulf states through soft power (i.e., through the media), Saddam Hussein resorted to military power in his bid for regional hegemony. On August 2, 1990, Iraq launched its invasion of Kuwait, marking Saddam's first attempt to challenge the Gulf monarchies militarily. Even after the liberation of Kuwait and the imposition of sanctions on Iraq, the invasion and its memory remained a harsh reminder to the small Gulf sheikhdoms of an important reality. It underscored their vulnerability to the hegemonic ambitions of large regional powers such as Iraq, Iran, and even Saudi Arabia. In their quest for greater security, countries like Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE moved quickly to enhance bilateral defense relations with the United States. However, pure strategic considerations were not the only thing on their minds as they sought to protect themselves against perceived regional threats.

In almost every conversation I have with Kuwaitis about the invasion of 1990, I am struck by how they have managed to keep close track of who among governments, political groups, and individuals supported them and who abandoned their cause during *al-'edwan* (the invasion). Many of those who supported Saddam's invasion are barred from appearing on Kuwaiti television.¹⁸ Indeed there were journalists and commentators who sided with Saddam Hussein and did not raise an eyebrow at talk of annexing Kuwait. Resentment is certainly one of the reactions that this created in the oil-rich Gulf, but, more importantly, this historical episode generated a strong feeling among the ruling elites of the region that something must be done to accommodate if not win the support of Arab public opinion. This feeling brought about greater investments in satellite media. Such investments were considered to be a way of exerting influence over public opinion, and more specifically, a way of mitigating the wrath of Palestinians and their cause and keeping it away from their own domestic politics. The case of Qatar and its launch of Al-Jazeera illustrates how those security concerns were addressed using satellite media.

The defeat of Saddam Hussein and his eviction from Kuwait in 1991 ended the last hope for secular Arab nationalism to dominate the region. Islamism, as an ideology, filled the vacuum. Even Saddam himself took on the image of an Islamist during the war. For the first time the phrase "Allah Akbar" was written on the Iraqi flag and Saddam Hussein praying became a recurring image on Iraqi satellite TV.

The defeat of Saddam further consolidated the position of Saudi Arabia in the region in both soft and hard power terms. Smaller Gulf states felt vulnerable to both Saudi Arabia and Iran and always had the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on their minds. Qatar, in particular, felt it might face a similar invasion like that of Kuwait, but the aggressor this time would be either Iran or Saudi Arabia. The conflict between Iran and Qatar over gas is almost

a replica of the conflict between Kuwait and Iraq over oil before the invasion. In the same way that the Iraqis accused Kuwait of draining their oil fields, Iran also accused Qatar of draining its gas fields. This vulnerability led Qatar to contemplate its security. In the realm of hard power, Qatar looked to the United States as a guarantor of its security against its two powerful neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Qatar's insecurities were accentuated even further in 1995 when Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani came to power after deposing his father in a bloodless coup. The coup was a source of escalating tension between Qatar and its neighbors in the Gulf during the subsequent years. In the beginning, Saudi and Egyptian newspapers did not support the new regime, claiming it went against Arab values and traditions. Some of the father's supporters fled to Egypt and others went to Saudi Arabia. This led to the feeling among the Qatari elite that Saudi Arabia and Egypt were trying to bring the deposed emir back.¹⁹

Already by the early 1990s, tensions between Doha and Riyadh were on the rise. In 1992, after confrontations between Bedouin on the Qatari-Saudi border, Qatar suspended a 1965 border agreement with Saudi Arabia. Continued border disputes between the two countries resulted in Qatar's boycott of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in 1994. A year later, Qatar protested the choice of a Saudi candidate for the post of secretary-general of the GCC and walked out of the GCC meeting. Moreover, Saudi Arabia raised its eyebrows at talk of Qatar's intent to supply gas to Israel in October 1995. It was later that same year that Saudi Arabia announced in public its welcoming of the deposed Qatari emir, angering the new regime in Doha even further.²⁰ The new emir rose to power in this context of Saudi-Qatari tension.

The new regime was vulnerable both militarily and politically. Most of its policies came as a response to these perceived threats on the military, economic, and cultural fronts. The new regime signed bilateral treaties with the United States to guarantee its security in terms of hard power. On the soft power front, it created a media equivalent of a super-gun under the name of Al-Jazeera to keep Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on the defensive, or at the very least to respond to attacks appearing in the Egyptian and Saudi Arabian media. The attacks and counterattacks between the Egyptian and Qatari media were vicious.²¹ I was told that Al-Jazeera did not stop its attack on Egypt until the Egyptian minister of information sent his television crew to Geneva to record a six-hour interview with the deposed emir in which he made numerous embarrassing charges against the new regime in Doha. Egypt sent these tapes to Qatar and to Al-Jazeera and threatened to air them in their entirety on an Egyptian satellite channel if Al-Jazeera did not stop its attacks on Egypt.²² This media battle culminated in 1997 when Egypt sent the head of its intelligence agency, Omar Suleiman, to Doha to respond to Qatar's constant Al-Jazeera attacks against Egypt.²³ Al-Jazeera finally ceased its attacks on Egypt. However, Saudi Arabia remained a thorn in the side of the new Qatari regime.

Al-Jazeera and the Vulnerabilities of the New Regime

Al-Jazeera television was founded by a Qatari royal decree on February 8, 1996. It was a response to regime vulnerabilities on the Islamic front as well as a means of legitimizing Qatar's military and economic pact with the United States in the years of angry Arab audiences. The Qatari emir provided Al-Jazeera with \$137 million in start-up costs. Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, continues to fund Al-Jazeera from a line item in the budget of the emiri diwan (court) that reaches \$300 million annually.²⁴ The head of Al-Jazeera's board of directors is Sheikh HamEad bin Tamer Al-Thani, the deputy minister of information.²⁵ The operating funds come from state finances and many of the people actually running the station are state officials, even after the dissolution of the ministry of information. Therefore, it is very difficult to claim that Al-Jazeera is independent.

This should not detract from the fact that Al-Jazeera has been known for its willingness to flirt with contentious issues that break longstanding taboos, not to mention its granting of airtime to controversial figures ranging from opposition leaders in Arab countries to Israeli officials. The popularity of Al-Jazeera can be traced to Operation Desert Fox in Iraq in 1998, when, as in the case of the Afghanistan war, Al-Jazeera was the only station covering the event from the scene.²⁶ It also gained popularity during the Palestinian Al-Aqsa Intifada. Al-Jazeera's raw coverage of the intifada and its consistent criticism of various Arab countries and leaders gave it instant appeal. The absence of another all-news channel in the Arab world contributed to the popularity of Al-Jazeera; its only competition was CNN in English.

Al-Jazeera has contributed to raising the ceiling of what can and cannot be said on pan-Arab television. However, this does not apply to local television stations inside each country. Al-Jazeera brought to Arab audiences Western-style political analysis through programs like *al-Ittijah al-Mi'akas* (The opposite direction) and *Akhar min-Ray* (More than one opinion), both of which took their inspiration from American programs like the *McLaughlin Group* and *Crossfire*. Yet those who applaud Al-Jazeera for its contribution to free speech fail to mention the extensive blacklist that Al-Jazeera has developed of Arab liberals or independent thinkers who do not bear allegiance to either the Islamist or Arab nationalist causes and who do not toe the official Qatari line.²⁷

Watching Al-Jazeera, one might forget that September 11 ever happened, and think that the United States invaded Afghanistan for no reason other than to target Muslims. There is no mention of any crime committed by the Taliban regime. Bin Laden's and Al-Zawahiri's history of terror, both in the Arab world and globally, are forgotten. Instead, Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and the Taliban are portrayed as the victims.

Although there is a general understanding that Arab heads of state are not to be criticized in the Arab media, Al-Jazeera seems to violate this rule.

How is it, then, that Al-Jazeera can get away with scathing reports against Arab governments and leaders? The clichéd answer attributes this to the vigorous independence of Al-Jazeera. Such an explanation ignores the political context and the realities that really shape Arab media coverage. The truth is that Al-Jazeera's coverage is closely connected to the political freedom that Qatar gained by breaking away from its dependence on Arab neighbors for security. Politically Qatar has had to find a counterweight to Saudi Arabia and Iran. Thus it has chosen a special military relationship with the United States to guard against a fate like that of Kuwait in 1990. However, Qatar remained culturally a vulnerable state. To fend off the influence of Saudi and Iranian Islamic credentials, Qatar "gave" part of Al-Jazeera to the Muslim Brotherhood. The director of the station, Waddah Khanfar, is a Muslim Brother, Sheikh Qaradawi, the TV star of the Muslim Brotherhood, has a regular show on Al-Jazeera, and another second-generation Muslim Brotherhood member, Ahmed Mansour, has two shows on Al-Jazeera: *Shahed ala al-Asre* (A witness to history) and *Bila Hudoud* (Without borders). Al-Jazeera glorifies Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al-Bannah; the channel aired a two-part documentary on him in the months of January–February 2006.²⁸ The dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in Al-Jazeera can only make sense if we realize that Saudi Arabia expelled most Muslim Brotherhood leaders when they did not endorse the Saudi position during the 1990 Gulf War. The Muslim Brothers can boost Qatar's Islamic credentials as well as serve as the spearhead in a media war against Saudi Arabia. Tension between Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood is obvious in the comments of Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, Saudi Arabia's minister of interior, in an interview with the Kuwait daily *Al-Siyasa*. In that interview, Prince Nayef accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being the source of all evil in the region, especially in Saudi Arabia.²⁹

As we have seen, Qatar is vulnerable to its neighbors on a cultural level. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are both Wahhabi states, and the Wahhabi official doctrine of Qatar makes it subject to fatwas from Saudi Arabia. These fatwas, in addition to Saudi Arabia's strong religious standing as the home of the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, give Saudi Arabia power over Qatar. To protect itself from Saudi domination in the religious arena, Qatar moved toward adopting elements of popular Islam. This included embracing Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi, Al-Qaradawi is an Egyptian and the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, and he has lived in Qatar for 20 years and has Qatari citizenship. Al-Qaradawi is also the favorite preacher of many members of the radical movements. In fact, in an interview with Al-Jazeera following September 11, he could not bring himself to condemn Bin Laden and his group. More recently, he was denied entrance to the UAE because of what he preaches.

Other Islamists who have appeared on Al-Jazeera are hosts such as Maher Abdullah (who died a year ago), Tayseer Alouni, and Ahmed Mansour, mentioned earlier. From the Balkans to South Asia, leaders of Islamist movements trust Mansour. Since 1988, he has served as Peshawar correspondent to many Arab papers. While in Pakistan, he cultivated an impressive network of relations that started with his close associations with Islamist leaders, ranging from Burhanuddin Rabbani to the Taliban. He was managing editor of *Al-Mujtama'a* (The society) magazine, a Kuwaiti weekly published by the Al-Islah group, an umbrella Islamist group whose members range from the Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi extremists.³⁰ Mansour was brought to Al-Jazeera in 1996 to produce and host an Islamist show *Al-Shari'a Wal-Haya* (Life and Islamic law), which later was hosted by Maher Abdullah and is now being hosted by the newly veiled Khadija bin Qina. Bin Qina, an Algerian newswoman, joined Al-Jazeera in 1997. When she interviewed me in 1997 at Al-Jazeera studio in Doha she struck me as a secular woman with Arab nationalist leanings. One would not expect such a woman to don the veil any time soon. In 2003, Bin Qina surprised her audience by appearing in the new fashion, "the Islamic" veil, as she read the newscast. This was big news in the Arab press. For the past ten years, these stories have made it to the front pages of Arab newspapers because of this trend that developed among celebrity women in the Arab world. Many female movie stars, such as Shams Al-Baroudi, whose profile in the Arab world is close to that of Angelina Jolie in the United States, have decided to wear the hijab and abandon their acting careers. These include stars such as Shadia, Shahera, and many others.³¹ Analysts attributed the veiling of actresses and TV anchor women to a payoff of conservative Gulf money. As soon as she started wearing the hijab, Bin Qina became the main host of the *Al-Shari'a Wal-Haya* religious program. When I asked about the reason behind her veil, many Al-Jazeera journalists told me that it was the direct impact of her relationship with Al-Jazeera's Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi.

The Islamist takeover of Al-Jazeera was slow, but deliberate. Not only did the personnel become Islamists, the content and also the reporting took on an Islamic coloring. One only has to refer to Ahmed Mansour's coverage of the American siege of Fallujah, in which he was crying at the top of his lungs about the necessity of jihad, to understand this transformation. Mansour was begging the Arabs to come and defend Fallujah and save its women and children from American barbarism. He went beyond being a reporter to being the jihadist that he was during the Afghan war in the 1980s.

Embracing Islamists allowed Qatar to build up its "Islamic," specifically Wahhabi, credentials against those of its Saudi rivals who derived much of their legitimacy from adherence to conservative Islamic codes and their efforts to promote Wahhabi values abroad. It also provided Qatar with the

Islamic leverage to stand up to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Relations between Qatar and Iran have been shaky at times. For example, in 1989, the Iranian oil minister issued a provocative statement claiming that a third of the natural gas of the North Field was in Iranian waters. More recently, Iranian clerics criticized Qatar for providing the United States with base-support for its military operations in Iraq.³² The airtime that Al-Jazeera devotes to Osama Bin Laden and other Saudi oppositional figures can be explained in the context of Qatar's political goals vis-à-vis its confrontation against Saudi Arabia.

On the American front, Qatar and the United States signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement on June 23, 1992, giving the United States base-rights in Qatar, thereby officially including the Gulf sheikhdom under the U.S. security umbrella.³³ By 1996, Qatar had completed the building of Al-Udeid airbase, which the United States used for supply flights for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Qatar served as headquarters for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). The expansion in U.S.-Qatari military relations was concomitant with the decline in U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, a major issue of contention that was used by Saudi opposition figures to discredit the ruling elite in the kingdom. Hence Qatar, along with its smaller neighbors, was moving toward limiting the role played by Saudi Arabia in the regional security formula, which was becoming less of a U.S.-Saudi venture and more of a set of individual partnerships between the United States and each of the small Gulf monarchies.

Qatar also tied itself to America economically. The country managed to compensate for the fact that it exported almost no oil to the United States by working with American companies such as Exxon Mobil, Occidental, and Pennzoil to develop its natural gas resources. Qatar's gas revenue is projected to outstrip oil revenues for the first time in 2007.³⁴ The government's eagerness to develop its natural gas resources came at a time when it was trying to distance itself from the dominance of oil-rich Saudi Arabia, which holds a considerable amount of leverage in the OPEC. In comparison, Qatar's oil production is small, and the country's oil resources are likely to run out by 2020.³⁵ Qatar's strategy to exploit its vast natural gas resources as a foreign policy instrument is helped by the absence of international regulation of natural gas production levels. "From the Qatari perspective, the shift in its energy export portfolio to natural gas has allowed it to move to a commodity less influenced by Saudi Arabia's leadership than oil, since the kingdom had no plans to export natural gas abroad."³⁶ When asked if there would ever be an OPEC to regulate the natural gas market, Abdullah Bin Hamad Al-Attiyah, Qatar's minister of energy, industry water and electricity, answered that this would never happen.³⁷ Thus Qatar was able to consolidate its independence from Saudi Arabia and strengthen its ties with the United States by playing the natural gas card.³⁸

Saudi-Qatari Conflict and the Bin Laden Tapes

Many Western analysts have focused exclusively on the anti-American message of Osama Bin Laden's audio and video tapes aired on Al-Jazeera. This is part of the interpretive context of Bin Laden's tape but certainly not a comprehensive way of understanding those tapes. The missing context is that of Saudi-Qatari tension. Bin Laden was first and foremost an enemy of the Saudi state even before he turned his jihad against U.S. targets and interests. The airing of Bin Laden's messages on Al-Jazeera reveals a great deal about Qatar's policies vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.

Bin Laden's frequent appearances on Al-Jazeera is part of a tacit understanding between Qatar and Bin Laden whereby Al-Jazeera airs his anti-American statements that give him global stature, while Qatar has the exclusive use of Bin Laden's tapes in its media war with Saudi Arabia. In Qatar's conflict with Saudi Arabia Bin Laden is the only credible force that could undermine the Saudi royal family. His speeches may be dominated by anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric, but the actual airing of Bin Laden's tapes by Al-Jazeera is directed more at Saudi Arabia than America. Consider the following excerpt from Bin Laden's statements that Al-Jazeera airs repeatedly:

We also stress to honest Muslims that they should move, incite, and mobilize the [Islamic] nation, amid such grave events and hot atmosphere so as to liberate themselves from those unjust and renegade ruling regimes, which are enslaved by the United States.

They should also do so to establish the rule of God on earth.

The most qualified regions for liberation are Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, the land of the two holy mosques [Saudi Arabia], and Yemen.³⁹

Part of the intellectual coherence of Bin Laden's message is that it builds on the previous messages and fatwas that he has issued. The underpinning of his message is his break with Saudi Arabia in 1990. The fatwas that followed it targeted the Saudi regime. Al-Qaeda was formed to fight the far enemy as a way of undermining the near enemy. Saudi Arabia is both Bin Laden's and Qatar's enemy. Superficially, it is very surprising that Bin Laden criticizes the American presence in Saudi Arabia, while ignoring American military bases elsewhere in the Gulf region like Qatar, where the U.S. Central Command was based at the time of the Iraq invasion in 2003. But if one understands the Qatar-Bin Laden tacit agreement, Bin Laden's reluctance to criticize the American presence in Qatar becomes comprehensible.

Bin Laden is by no means the only Saudi oppositional figure who appears on Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera often interviews anti-regime figures such as Sa'd Al-Fagih, Mohamed Al-Masari, Mabrook Al-Saleh, Abdullah Al-Hamad, and many more. This trend has also been replicated by some American media outlets that unwittingly played into the hands of Al-Jazeera

by re-airing Bin Laden's statements under the impression that they have a primarily anti-American message. The American-sponsored Al-Hurra copied Al-Jazeera practices by giving airtime to Saudi opposition figures.

The main point here is that we cannot interpret the media campaign of Bin Laden through the prism of the U.S. confrontation against international terrorism. The dynamics of the Arab media (Qatar-Saudi media rivalry in this case) play a great role in shaping the anti-American message on Arab television screens and paper. When we watch Bin Laden's videotapes on Western television stations with the Al-Jazeera logo in the corner of the screen, we must bear in mind that what is at play is not simply an anti-American dynamic. There are two agendas at work: First, Bin Laden's own goals of undermining U.S. interests and rallying support for his confrontation with the West. Second, there is his more direct campaign to undermine the Saudi royal family. In this, Bin Laden and Qatar see eye-to-eye. Saudi Arabia is their common enemy. This is an alliance based on shared interests as well as on ideological connection.

As shown above, Al-Jazeera is essentially Qatar's tool for pursuing political its objectives in the region. Qatar's political, economic, and military alliances with the United States freed the country—and Al-Jazeera—from any Arab obligation. The confidence Qatari leaders had acquired due to the American military's presence on the ground emboldened them to the point that they did not fear Arab reactions to Al-Jazeera's reports. Similarly, despite its close relationship with America, Qatar still allowed members of the Muslim Brotherhood to openly criticize the United States on Al-Jazeera as a way of maintaining its strong relationship with "popular Islam" in its efforts to bolster itself vis-à-vis the Islamic credentials of its neighbors, mainly those of Saudi Arabia and Iran. In short, Qatar gave the airstrip to the Americans and the airwaves to the Islamists and the Arab nationalists.

How Independent Is Al-Jazeera?

The Arabic-language *Forbes* reported recently that the operational costs of Al-Jazeera are no less than \$100 million, then there is the \$50 million per year that will be spent on the newly launched Al-Jazeera sports channel.⁴⁰ The channel's advertisement revenues, which are supplemented by revenues generated by selling original footage and leasing equipments, although growing, are not sufficient to give Al-Jazeera full financial autonomy from Qatar's government.⁴¹

Al-Jazeera remains a Qatari government enterprise. Sheikh Hamad bin Tamer Al-Thani, the current chairman of Al-Jazeera, was the under-secretary at the Qatari Ministry of Information and Culture before it was dismantled. Al-Jazeera's managing director, Jasim Al-Ali, was the director of Qatar TV when it was still controlled by the government.⁴² It is obvious from all of this that Al-Jazeera is simply Qatar's Information Ministry with a new name and a new agenda. Al-Jazeera's courage in its negative coverage of Arab

governments is a result of Qatar's breakaway from the Arab regional security system and its complete dependence on the United States. Al-Jazeera's freedom and editorial independence will only be proven when it reports critically on the internal affairs of Qatar. Thus far the state of Qatar and Qatari affairs are off-limits to Al-Jazeera. The day Al-Jazeera airs a documentary on how the current emir deposed his father will be when we can say that Al-Jazeera is free.

Al-Arabiya: Saudi Response to Al-Jazeera?

Within the context of the Saudi-Qatari conflict, Al-Jazeera did not stay unchallenged for long. As a response to Qatar's media attacks, Saudi Arabia launched the Al-Arabiya all-news channel in 2003. Al-Arabiya is part of the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), which consists of MBC 1, 2, 3 and Al-Arabiya, known as MBC4. MBC was founded by King Fahd's brother-in-law Walid Al-Ibrahim, commonly seen as the front-man for the King's son Prince Abdel-Aziz. Saudi Arabia launched Al-Arabiya after 8 years of relentless attacks by Al-Jazeera on the Saudi political order and the Saudi royal family. Al-Arabiya's programming shows that the station is more than an alternative to Al-Jazeera; it is a counter-missile directed at the Qatari news channel itself. Al-Arabiya is known for picking up the slack in areas that Al-Jazeera is less willing to explore in its "censorship-free" reporting, such as the relations between Qatar and Israel.

Just as the regional insecurities felt by the Qatari regime gave rise to Al-Jazeera, the rise of MBC in 1991 can also be viewed as the Saudi royal family's response to the insecurities induced by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. A startling fact of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was that, with the exception of the Gulf populations, the Arab public supported Saddam. The Gulf monarchies were shocked by the reaction of Arabs to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. Throughout North Africa, Saddam was the champion. Saddam's propaganda, the Saudis thought, carried the day. Indeed Saddam financed many newspapers and kept many Arab journalists on his payroll.

A partial list of the names of these journalists was published in the Iraqi *Al-Mada* newspaper after the collapse of Saddam's regime.⁴³ Palestinians marched in the streets carrying pictures of Saddam, the man who told them that he would liberate Palestine through Kuwait. The reaction in Jordan was totally anti-Kuwaiti and the population supported the annexation of Kuwait. The Jordanian response was so overwhelming that King Hussein himself had to oppose the United States to keep his throne. These shocking realities convinced the Saudis that their media campaign against Saddam had failed and that they must create a television station to convince the Arabs to support the liberation of Kuwait and defense of Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, a glance at the modern history of the region shows that hegemonic states have often managed to justify their aggressions against smaller states using media propaganda. Iraq's aggression in Kuwait, like Nasser's intervention in Yemen, is a case in point.

Within this context, MBC was founded in London in 1991. ARA Group International, the Saudi founding organization, aimed at providing Arab audiences with a mixture of entertainment and news.⁴⁴ The main founders included Sheikh Saleh Kamel, a famous Saudi businessman, and Walid Al-Ibrahim, King Fahd's brother-in-law and uncle of the King's youngest son Abde-Aziz, along with his brother Abde-Aziz Al-Ibrahim. Differences in policy, however, led principal backers to buy out Kamel's 37.5 percent share. MBC1 is the biggest money maker of the channels and has the largest audience. MBC2, launched in 2002 and devoted to movies and subtitled English language programming, is watched all over the region, including a large audience in Iran. MBC3, dedicated to children's programming, was launched in 2004 and has a smaller audience.⁴⁵ MBC4 airs a combination of talk shows, sitcoms, and news, much of it subtitled. This is a result of a recent contract between MBC and CBS and ABC News that granted MBC the rights to air all content and programming.⁴⁶ In 2003, with start-up capital of \$300 million, MBC set up the 24-hour news channel Al-Arabiya with headquarters in Dubai, attracting shareholders from the governments of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain, along with then Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri.⁴⁷ Walid Al-Ibrahim is known to be backed by King Fahd's \$28 billion fortune. In addition to the ARA Group, he is also owner of ANA Radio and Television, and the news wire service ME News. He also acquired United Press International (UPI) at a bankruptcy court auction in New York in 1992.

As we have seen, Al-Arabiya was largely the Saudi reaction to the growing dominance of Al-Jazeera. The latter was viewed by Al-Saud as a danger, as it gave airtime to Osama Bin Laden and the enemies of the Saudi royal family.⁴⁸ It is also widely believed that Al-Ibrahim's decision to pour \$300 million into the launching of Al-Arabiya was an attempt by the Saudi elite to reassert its influence over the Arab satellite television industry after losing much of that power following the rise in Al-Jazeera's global profile and popularity. Al-Arabiya is still nowhere near balancing its costs and revenues. Its yearly costs are estimated at \$70 million, and advertisement revenues are a little more than \$10 million.⁴⁹

Al-Jazeera vs. Al-Arabiya: Saudi and Qatar

The content of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya vividly reflects the political rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In my study of Arab media content, I observed a pattern in their news reporting suggesting that the two channels often exchange blows on behalf of their respective governments.

For example, on February 25, 2005 Al-Jazeera reported on a State Department human rights report, emphasizing the poor Saudi human rights record highlighted in the report. This report on the conditions of human rights worldwide was reduced by Al-Jazeera to being a report about Saudi Arabia. There was no mention of what it said about Qatar.⁵⁰

A few minutes after this report, Al-Arabiya responded by reporting on the "secret visit" of the Israeli deputy minister of education to Qatar. This was an embarrassment to the state of Qatar and to Al-Jazeera, which prides itself on being anti-Israeli in public. Al-Arabiya had a field day catching the Qataris conducting secret meetings with the Israelis, thus showing to their audience the "hypocrisy" of Al-Jazeera and Qatar. The style of reporting was very suggestive. It stated that the wife of the emir of Qatar suggestion secretly invited the Israeli deputy secretary of education to visit Qatar. The suggestion of secrecy implied a furtive liaison with sexual overtones between a Jewish male (the Israeli official) and an Arab female (the wife of the emir). When I asked Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, the director of Al-Arabiya about this, he said "we got them this time." He explained to me that his aggressive reporting had forced Al-Jazeera spokesperson Jihad Balout and the new public relations person for Al-Jazeera, the famed Tim Sebastian, the anchor of the English show *Hard Talk*, to address the story. Al-Rashed pointed out that Sebastian denied the connection between the Israeli deputy minister of education and the wife of the emir. "We challenged them by bringing the Israeli deputy minister on air on Arabiya several minutes later. He confirmed our story and told us that he was invited by the very foundation headed by the wife of the emir of Qatar. We got them big, I tell you."⁵¹ Al-Rashed said with great joy in his voice.

Al-Jazeera then responded with a report on the Saudi political prisoner Sheikh Said bin Zuair. The report claimed that he was suffering from very poor health and that the Arab Organization for Human Rights hold the Saudi authorities responsible for his fate.⁵² Any observer of the two channels familiar with the underlying tension between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and its reflections on Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera cannot help but see these "news" shows as little more than entertainment.

Another example of how the content of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya reflects the rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia is the recent coverage of the meeting of U.S. President George Bush and the then Arabia's Crown Prince of Saudi, Abdullah bin Abde-Aziz Al-Saud, in Crawford, Texas on April 25, 2005. On the day of the visit, Al-Jazeera featured a statement from Human Rights Watch that called on President Bush to intervene on the issue of three members of the Saudi opposition who were arrested more than a year ago in Saudi Arabia.⁵³ Al-Jazeera noted that the Human Rights Watch statement also asked Bush to put pressure on the Saudi government to put an end to the death penalty and to appoint women to local councils. On the same day, Al-Arabiya responded with a scathing report on a member of the Qatari royal family who was accused of having sexual relations with underage girls in Prague.⁵⁴ Recent reports from Al-Arabiya include one on the lawsuit launched on behalf of the wife of the emir of Qatar, Sheikha Muza al-Masnad, against the Iraqi-owned and London-based daily *Al-Zaman*. The Qataris, according to the Al-Arabiya report, accused *Al-Zaman* of being a "Saudi mouthpiece."⁵⁵ In the sections below, I shall describe some of the

main themes of the two stations' news programming and how these themes relate to and reinforce the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. They can be divided into ones directly related to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, i.e., negative coverage of Saudi Arabia on Al-Jazeera and negative coverage of Qatar on Al-Arabiya, and themes that reflect the competing approaches of the two states in their relations with countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Libya.

Al-Jazeera's airtime generosity to Saudi opposition figures other than Bin Laden himself is also a product of the Saudi-Qatari political rift. One figure who has benefited from this eagerness to feature Saudi dissidents is Mohsen Al-Awaji, who has often appeared on shows such as Ahmed Mansour's *Bila Hudoud*. In May 2003, Mansour interviewed Al-Awaji to discuss the problems of the Saudi system.⁵⁶ What is interesting about such interviews is that Mansour usually gives Al-Awaji the positive title of a reformer rather than using neutral terms such as oppositionist.⁵⁷ Al-Awaji also took part in a panel on the ascendancy of terrorism in the Arab world moderated by Chassan Bin Jeddo in 2004.⁵⁸ Mansour devoted a program to Salman Al-Auda (a Saudi dissident clerk) in 2004.⁵⁹ Moreover, Al-Jazeera has given a great deal of coverage to the exiled Saudi oppositionist Sa'id Al-Faqih, who was added to the international list of terrorists in 2004.⁶⁰ In 2003, Al-Jazeera gave positive coverage to Al-Faqih's allegations that the Saudi government tried to kidnap him.⁶¹

An Al-Jazeera report in 2006 covered border problems between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The report, which was put together by Ahmad Al-Sahalfi from the Yemini side of the border, exaggerated the problem of families that had been divided by the current border configuration. It presented the problem as if it were similar to the border problem between the occupied Golan Heights and Syria.⁶²

Al-Arabiya on the other hand picks up what Al-Jazeera is reluctant to report. The station's director, Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, once said in reference to its reporting of Qatari affairs, "we did not exaggerate and we did not create the stories ourselves. We simply conveyed real stories. . . . We know that the Qatari visual and print media ignores them (those stories), but that is their own problem."⁶³ What Al-Rashed was referring to was Qatar's dirty laundry, namely its low-profile relationship with Israel, the royal family's scandals, the country's cooperation with the U.S. military, and its democratic shortcomings.

Qatari-Israeli Relations

Al-Arabiya's programming contains a great deal about Qatar's covert relationship with Israel. In February 2005, Al-Arabiya relayed a report from an Israeli newspaper about a secret visit by the Israeli deputy minister of education to Qatar, suggesting that this was a sign of efforts to normalize relations between the two countries.⁶⁴ Two days later it ran a segment about the Arab reaction to the Israeli minister's visit to Doha, adding that he met secretly with the wife of Qatar's emir secretly.⁶⁵ Al-Arabiya also reported

the controversy that arose because of its own coverage of the story.⁶⁶ In another story, Al-Arabiya reported in May 2005 that Qatar requested that Israel support its nomination for membership to the United Nations Security Council.⁶⁷ In August of the same year, it aired a news segment that said Qatar's emir would donate \$10 million to an Israeli soccer team,⁶⁸ and the following month it reported that the Qatari government would provide financial aid to a project to build a stadium in Israel.⁶⁹ On September 15, Al-Arabiya reported a meeting between the Israeli and the Qatari foreign ministers in New York.⁷⁰

Qatar's Relations with the United States

Another recurring theme in Al-Arabiya's programming is Qatar's close association with the United States. For example, the station covered a statement from the Qatari foreign minister expressing acceptance of the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative, which has been declared by Washington as the main umbrella for democracy promotion in the Arab world.⁷¹ Another report in the same year suggested that Saddam Hussein was imprisoned in Qatar without the knowledge of the government.⁷² U.S.-Qatari military cooperation is often the topic of Al-Arabiya shows, highlighting the presence of American troops in Qatar and the small sheikhdom's role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁷³

The Al-Murrah Tribe Story

Another batch of Qatari dirty laundry that Al-Arabiya brandished was its the incident of the Al-Murrah tribe. The government of Qatar deprived 5,000 members of the Al-Murrah tribe of their Qatari citizenship for their alleged support for the deposed former emir.⁷⁴ This story was discussed in depth both in news reports,⁷⁵ and talk shows on Al-Arabiya.⁷⁶ The station followed the story for almost three months.⁷⁷

Qatari Royal Scandals

Al-Arabiya has also taken the lead in reporting on the scandals of Qatari royals. In one story, Al-Arabiya interviewed a media analyst who spoke against a British court's ruling against an Iraqi newspaper made on the grounds that it defamed the Qatari emir's wife.⁷⁸ Al-Arabiya was also active in bringing to light a corruption scandal involving the head of the Qatari National Council for Culture, Art and Antiquities, a member of the royal family. Prince Saud bin Mohamed Al-Thani was allegedly fired because of illegal spending practices. Al-Arabiya ran a report asserting that the Qatari media had provided little coverage of the scandal.⁷⁹

The point here is that both a London-based Arab analyst and Al-Arabiya know that the accusations and counter-accusations are between the two states

and their proxies and not a media war between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. According to Al-Arabiya, "Saudi Arabia has been exposed for decades to media campaigns through newspapers, books, and television, and this whole Qatari attack is something that is not new."⁸⁰ Another scandal that has been aired on Al-Arabiya is that of the Qatari royal who was accused of having sexual relations with underage girls in the Czech Republic. Al-Arabiya was keen on following the court case in Prague, where Sheikh Hamed bin Abdullah Al-Thani was put on trial.⁸¹ Al-Arabiya quoted a Czech news agency saying that some 25 young Czech girls under the age of 15 had sex with the accused Qatari man.⁸² Such reports may not be the most important news story of the day as far as the audience is concerned, but they are designed to embarrass the Qatari royal family. Al-Jazeera counters by featuring Saudi dissidents who accuse the Saudi royal family of corruption and mismanagement of the country. They also highlight the status of women in Saudi Arabia and abuses of human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya on Syria-Lebanon

Another story that demonstrates the Saudi-Qatari rivalry in the respective programming content of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya is that of Syria, its involvement with Lebanese politics and the assassination of former Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafiq Al-Hariri, and the Assad regime's standoff with the international community on these two issues. We find that Al-Jazeera's programming is more favorable to, if not directly sympathetic with, the Syrian regime. Al-Arabiya's programming is more critical of Syria and sympathetic to Lebanese aspirations for independence. Once again, politics is at the heart of this discrepancy between the two channels' coverage. Al-Arabiya's sponsor, Saudi Arabia, has publicly taken a hard-line against Syrian policy in Lebanon since the assassination of Al-Hariri, a Saudi citizen and a close associate of King Fahd since the 1980s. Syria's alliance with Iran and its support of Shi'a dominated Hezbollah is certainly a source of great discomfort for Riyadh. Qatar's policy in managing its rivalry with Saudi is to stay on the opposite side of Riyadh on any given issue. It also has close relations with Syria. It was reported in 2006 that Qatar had become Syria's number one trading partner, with \$800 million in trading volume in 2006.⁸³ Content analysis of the channel's coverage of Syrian and Lebanese affairs from December 2005 until the end of February 2006 is illustrative of the Saudi-Qatari political rivalry that takes place in the satellite space.

Assassination of Jibrán Tuéini

The two channel coverage of the assassination of Jibrán Tuéini, an anti-Syrian Lebanese journalist and politician, is reflective of Al-Arabiya's pro-Lebanese stance and Al-Jazeera's sympathy with the Syrian regime

that was accused of his murder. Al-Jazeera reported the death in a short segment:

The assassination of the Lebanese journalist politician Jibrán Tuéini as a result of a car explosion in the Melks area. The Lebanese ruling majority was quick to accuse Syria, and the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt was quick to accuse Damascus, claiming that [the assassination] meant to serve as a message from Syria, especially after the latest statements by President Bashar Al-Asad. Pro-Syrian circles have criticized the haste in accusing Syria, and spoke of an international-Israeli project to implicate Syria.⁸⁴

With Al-Arabiya, we find much more sophisticated coverage. Al-Arabiya's reports did cite Syrian denial of any involvement in the assassination, however, they provided a more sophisticated look at the Lebanese reaction. The station quoted very dramatic and serious statements from Lebanon's Prime Minister Fouad Al-Sanióra:

He [Al-Sanióra] said the government "will not give in" adding that "the criminals have kept killing us one after the other and we will not give in." Al-Sanióra indicated in a following statement "We will not give in, we will not give in. The criminals have kept killing us one after the other and we will not give in no matter how many times the hands of the criminals will hit our leaders."⁸⁵

The same report quotes Javier Solana, EU Higher Representative, condemning the assassination and expressing the EU's commitment to investigate the murder. It reports opposition leader Walid Jumblatt's accusation of Syria in his interview with the BBC. The report offers a biography of Tuéini and discusses his courage in advocating Lebanese independence and free speech.⁸⁶ Additionally, Al-Arabiya provided a series of follow-up stories that cited accusations against Syria.⁸⁷ Al-Arabiya chose to keep the assassination as a developing story throughout the month, while Al-Jazeera dealt with it only briefly.

Al-Arabiya and Syria

Another story that demonstrates the chasm between Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera's coverage of Syrian affairs is that of Abdul Halim Khaddam, former Syrian vice president who resigned last year and went into self-imposed exile in Paris. Between December 2005 and January 2006, Khaddam made some damning statements about the Assad regime, and, by doing so, instigated a new point of news rivalry between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya.

Al-Arabiya ran an exclusive interview with Khaddam, in which he strongly criticized the Syrian regime and suggested the nearing of its collapse.⁸⁸ A week later, Al-Arabiya reported on another statement made by

Khaddam in which he claimed that he would form a new government. Al-Jazeera responded by reporting the same statement and adding that “an Al-Jazeera correspondent in Paris learned that an official French delegation traveled to Syria on a special mission to Saudi Arabia to explore the possibility of moving Abdul Halim Khaddam former Syrian vice president there [to the kingdom].”⁸⁹ Unsurprisingly, many of the talk shows featured guests critical of Khaddam and his statements.⁹⁰ Moreover, Al-Jazeera reported on the same day that Al-Arabiya ran the interview that “the Syrian parliament called for the trying of Abdul Halim Khaddam on grounds of grand treason.”⁹¹

In response to Al-Arabiya’s interview with Khaddam, and another interview by Saudi-owned *Asfaryq Al-Awsat* with the former Syrian vice president,⁹² the Syrian government voiced its objections to the government of Saudi Arabia. In a move to reassure Damascus and convince Asad to cooperate with the international investigation of Hariri’s death, Riyadh agreed to “ask all Saudi media institutions to refrain from broadcasting Khaddam interviews or statements.”⁹³

American news stories on both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya are not designed solely to generate hatred for the United States. The primary function of anti-American stories is to provide a cover for what otherwise could be seen as “sleaze stories” aimed at embarrassing other countries’ royal families. Given this, one should not expect this portion of anti-Americanism to go away anytime soon, no matter how aggressive the efforts of U.S. public diplomacy might be. Anti-American programs are an integral part of the underlying tension between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and should be understood in that spirit.

Hezbollah’s 33-day War with Israel

During Hezbollah’s 33-day war with Israel, Arabs were watching two different versions of the war in Lebanon and reading two scripts about winners and losers. From day one, the Arab world was watching a split screen and an (un)civil war of words between two camps that helped to shape the geopolitical scene in the Middle East. The two halves of the split screen were Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. While outsiders focused on the war between Hezbollah and Israel, the Arabs were glued to their screens watching a mudslinging match between representatives of various states, various sects, and various groups. It was a war within the Arab world. If not quite reflecting a civil war in the making within Islam and Arabism, certainly this kind of reporting helped to accelerate this particular war. The first of the two camps is led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, while the second is made up of Syria, Qatar, Iran, and Hezbollah. As Qatar and Saudi Arabia own the two all news-channels that dominate the Arab airwaves, the Saudi-Qatari tension was reflected on the screens in the coverage of the Hezbollah-Israel war.

While Saudi Arabia called the war at the start “an uncalculated risk,” (mughamara), Qatar and its Syrian and Iranian allies called it a “pre-planned war against Hezbollah (Muamara), conspiracy.” Thus, it was a war of words between the camps of Mughamara and Muamara. The two camps also represented the Sunni-Shia divide within Islam. The Shia are represented by Syria and Iran, and adopted and highlighted by Al-Jazeera, while the Sunni camp is represented by Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, with Al-Arabiya as their main gun in the war of words. Thus, the story of the war as the Arabs watched it followed the political positions of the owners of the media outlets. At the beginning of the war, Al-Jazeera aired an exclusive interview with Hassan Nasrallah conducted by its bureau chief in Lebanon, Ghassan bin Jeddó. In this interview, Nasrallah blamed Egypt and Saudi Arabia for providing cover for the Israeli attack on Lebanon. This sound bite became part of Al-Jazeera’s promo for the war. The rest of this promo included showing U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice saying that she cared about the suffering of the civilians as pictures of dead and maimed children flashed across the screen. As Rice talks about how worried she is about Lebanese infrastructure, a bridge is blown up in the background. Then Nasrallah’s image appears telling Arab leaders, “if you do not support us, at least be neutral.”

Nasrallah gave two interviews to Al-Jazeera and to Bin Jeddó exclusively and gave none to Al-Arabiya or any other channel except Al-Manar TV, Hezbollah’s own TV station, where he made all his battle statements, and the Iranian state-owned, Arabic-speaking Al-Alam TV that is extensively watched by the Iraqi and Syrian Shia populations. One Lebanese journalist told me that Bin Jeddó is “a card-carrying member of Hezbollah. His relationship with Nasrallah is like that of Tayseer Alouni with Bin Laden.” This is a reference to the Al-Jazeera correspondent who was imprisoned in Spain for his ties with Al-Qaeda.

Al-Jazeera also ran two interviews with Hamad bin Jasim bin Jabar Al-Thani, the foreign minister of Qatar. In both interviews, Al-Thani blasted Saudi Arabia for saying that Hezbollah’s kidnapping of soldiers was mughamara (miscalculation). He blamed Saudi Arabia and Egypt for providing a “political cover” for Israel to wage its war against Lebanon, echoing Nasrallah’s interviews.

Al-Arabiya did not let these accusations go unanswered. While Al-Jazeera presented Nasrallah as the presiding force of Lebanon, Al-Arabiya focused on Fouad Al-Sanióra, the current prime minister, and on his speech to the Arab League Foreign Ministers. While Al-Jazeera supported Hezbollah and its state-within-a-state, Al-Arabiya focused on the formal state of Lebanon. It interviewed Saad Al-Hariri, the son of the assassinated former prime minister, and it broadcast the speeches of Sanióra live with sympathetic commentary. Al-Jazeera, by contrast, broadcast live the speech of Syrian president Bashar Al-Asad in which he accused Arab leaders of the opposing camp “half-men.” The station’s commentary on Asad’s the speech depended

very heavily on Syrian officials such as Emad al-Shuaibi, among others. Al-Jazeera's cheerleading of the speech as he talked about the victory of Hezbollah made the station sound and look like Syrian state television.

Al-Arabiya also devoted some time to responding to Qatari accusations and to what it dubbed Qatari "hypocrisy". One Saudi commentator expressed his bewilderment Qatari's policy—he wondered how it was that "Qatar gives its airstrips to the Americans and its airwaves to Hezbollah." The theme of Qatari hypocrisy was the subject of many Al-Arabiya programs, especially their primetime show *Panorama*, hosted by the Jordanian Montaha al-Rumahi. In response to the accusations of the Qatari foreign minister against Saudi Arabia, Al-Arabiya and the Saudi-owned *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, ran three stories about Qatar's relationship with Israel. The first was about the transfer of American "smart bombs" to Israel from the U.S. base in Qatar. This one brought an immediate response from Al-Jazeera, who interviewed the foreign minister who said that he had no knowledge of the bombs being transferred from Qatar to Israel. He told his host Mohammed Kreeshan, "If you knew the source of this information, you would know that it is false." Al-Arabiya also ran a story about the Israeli commercial office in Qatar. Its commentators made the point that if Qatar urges Egypt and Jordan who have formal peace treaties with Israel, to cut off their diplomatic relations, it should lead by closing the Israeli commercial office in Doha. The point of the coverage was that although Sheikh Hamad and Al-Jazeera were calling upon all the Arabs to rise up against the Israelis and the Americans, Qatar itself was being protected by the American bases and by its special alliance with Israel. *Asharq Al-Awsat* ran a story by its Israel correspondent, Nazeer Mujali, saying that the Qatari foreign minister flew to the Arab foreign ministers' meeting in Beirut from Israel and that his plane was escorted by two Israeli fighter jets. The Saudi newspaper wondered why Al-Jazeera did not cover such stories.⁹⁴

In response Al-Jazeera created a special one-hour daily program called *Saut al-Nass* (Voice of the people), a supposed call-in show that one of the journalists at Al-Jazeera told me was in fact a call-out. This means that Al-Jazeera operators call select people from various Arab countries. This is because many of these people cannot afford the cost of international calls. The show allows all kinds of insults to be aired without any intervention from the host. For example on the 4th August, 2006 Fairuz Zaiyani, the hostess of the show, accepted a call from a man who called Condoleezza Rice an "an old black witch"; another referred to her using the "N" word. Zaiyani did not intervene or apologize to her audience for what they heard. But this is the nature of Al-Jazeera. Faisal Al-Qasim who has a show called *Al-Hiyab Al-Mudkash*, hosted a program on August 8, 2006 on the differences between Israel and Nazi Germany and Olmert and Hitler. He featured on it a man called Ibrahim Aloush who stated that it was an injustice for Nazism to be compared with Zionism. "Zionism is far worse."⁹⁵

On the *Voice of the People* show on Al-Jazeera, it is open season on Saudi, Arabia and its leadership. Many of the callers are supposedly Saudis critical of the Saudi position and the royal family. One woman called Omm Saad described Saudi Arabia, on Al-Jazeera, as the "occupied land of the two holy mosques." Other supposed Saudis expressed shame over the attitude of their country toward Hezbollah.

The Arab media failed to show us anything about Hezbollah fighters in the Israel-Hezbollah war. Only on the Monday, after the ceasefire did one Hezbollah fighter give an interview to the Al-Jazeera correspondent Abbas Nasser. None for any other channel. Hezbollah saw Al-Arabiya as amplifying its own TV station Al-Manar. When I asked a Lebanese journalist on the ground about the lack of coverage of Hezbollah's activities, he said that everything in Lebanon was monitored by Hezbollah men who accompany journalists on their motor scooters. They make sure that nothing but the human suffering is reported. He told me that he had been taken to shelters and told who to talk to and who not. Hezbollah fed the world its own version of the story. He said, "If you look at any BBC or CNN report from South Beirut, you can see the men on their motor scooters in the background. They threatened journalists and confiscated pictures." He also added that if you watch Al-Jazeera you get the feeling that Israeli planes only target men and women over sixty and children under ten. These are the pictures that you see on Arab screens.

As the war wound down we saw the competition again between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya over writing the final script: a victory or a defeat for Hezbollah?

In his recent show "from Lebanon," Al-Jazeera's Beirut bureau chief Chassan Bin Jeddo presented an hour of Hezbollah supporters writing the script of victory and raising the flag of Hezbollah and pictures of Hassan Nasrallah. Although he presented them as ordinary people telling the audience that they are ready to sacrifice their children for Nasrallah and Hezbollah, it was obvious that all the people had to be selected very carefully and that the stage was prepared. In the background, there were the destroyed buildings of Al-Dahya (southern Beirut), with a white banner covering a large part of the background with the words "America is the real terrorist" written on it. The show intended to demonstrate that even the Christians of Lebanon, who represent 30 percent of the population, are supporters of Hezbollah. As this lengthy show was celebrating Hezbollah's victory, Al-Arabiya's correspondent from Marjeyoon near the Lebanese-Israeli border was the level of destruction and the Israeli soldiers still in control of the south. Al-Arabiya was covering a story about the possible existence of Israeli soldiers in some of the buildings of this destroyed town and its correspondent was asking locals whether they had seen any Israelis there since the beginning of the ceasefire. The correspondent was looking for verification of Israeli withdrawal by asking the local people. His segment was showing the misery and suffering of the people who were returning to

their destroyed homes. None of them praised the victory of Nasrallah, as did those appearing Al-Jazeera.

This is the story of two channels and the two sponsors of these channels who held different positions on the war. The rest of the Arab media were somewhere in between. This uncivil war of words endorsed by the latest speeches of Syrian president Bashar Al-Asad and Iranian president Ahmadinejad is likely to bring about a real war between the two camps, and may be sooner than many would expect. I hope that the above examples, have shown clearly the link between media ownership, the political and economic concerns of media owners, and media content.

Anti-Americanism on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya

How do we understand anti-Americanism in the context of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar that is represented by Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya? First, I would like to suggest that anti-Americanism in the Arab media is a complex phenomenon that is integrated into the very nature of the reporting of the Iraqi and the Palestinian stories. These two stories dominate Arab media such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, which target wide audiences from Morocco to Oman. The main message that all Arabs understand is that America supports Israel in its occupation of the Palestinian territories (Arab land), and that America itself is involved in occupying an Arab country, Iraq.

Anti-Americanism is also related to who is doing the reporting, producing, and editing of Arab media. A great many Arab journalists working on Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera are either Palestinians or Western nationals of Arab origin. For example, Faisal Al Qasim, a major talk-show host on Al-Jazeera, is a British Syrian, and Sami Haddad, another talk-show host, is British Palestinian. Hafiz Al-Mirazi, the station's Washington bureau chief, is American Egyptian, Ahmed Alshouli, the news editor, is Palestinian, and Eman Banora, the main anchorwoman on Al-Jazeera, is Palestinian. I devote a chapter to the relationship between journalists' backgrounds and their reporting (see Chapter 4). My point here is not that a Palestinian bias generates anti-Americanism on Al-Jazeera. Rather, these Palestinians and diaspora journalists know the Palestinian story very well from almost all sides—American, Israeli, and Arab. This allows them to be able to improve on the air, for they do not need directions from a producer. While well versed in the Palestinian story, these same people do not know the local stories of Morocco, Egypt, or Tunisia, let alone of Mauritania or Libya. This leads me to believe that over-reporting the Palestinian story and over-discussing it on talk-shows is due to the fact that many editors, correspondents, and also many talk-show hosts are Palestinians themselves. Content is shaped by what those who produce the Arab media know. It is also shaped by their ideological orientations, be they Islamists or Arab nationalists. In this particular package, anti-Americanism is always part of the

story, part of reporting, and part of the picture. I dedicate a chapter to the role of journalists in shaping Arab media coverage and as transnational actors.

This, however, is not true whenever there is a major local story. Palestine and Iraq were not the dominant stories on Lebanese TV stations for forty days after the death of Prime Minister Hariri. Following the Al-Hariri assassination, Palestine and Iraq were taken off the screen because journalists who were reporting the Al-Hariri story were Lebanese. They knew their story very well and therefore did not need Palestinian journalists to produce solid TV programming. Also, both America and Israel were nowhere to be seen on any of the Lebanese TV channels during Hariri's assassination and its aftermath.

The fact that local stories are not covered on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya allows for the dominance of pan-Arab, and therefore anti-American, stories to dominate the airwaves. This does not mean that Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera did not report the Hariri story. They did, but according to the agendas of their sponsors. Al-Arabiya took the side of the Hariri family and the Lebanese opposition, while Al-Jazeera took the pro-Syrian side. The conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia manifested itself on the Lebanese media scene as well.

The competition of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya is, as we have seen, part of a larger conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This conflict is multi-layered. It involves the Saudi brand of Islam vs. the Islam of Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is a conflict between oil represented by Saudi Arabia and gas represented by Qatar. It is a conflict between Egyptian journalists and Lebanese journalists. It is a conflict between Bin Laden and the Saudi royal family on Al-Jazeera and between the Al-Murrah tribe and the Qatari royal family on Al-Arabiya. Each of the satellite television channels acts on behalf of its Kafil (sponsor). While Al-Jazeera does the bidding of Qatar, Al-Arabiya is accountable to the Saudi state. To interpret these two channels outside the context of Saudi-Qatari tension is to be misled about the nature of both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya.

OPINION

The media war!

February 04, 2020



Dr. Khaled M. Batarfi

Soft Power is no less powerful than Hard Power. Cultural influence, in fact, is more effective than military use. American pop culture has taken the world by storm, for ages. BBC radio, then CNN satellite TV, dominated global airwaves for most of the last century. Now, they have competition.

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Silence is a language, and in some instances, silence is an answer. But we are at a stage that requires a lot of talk and less humbleness. Our opponents, ladies and gentlemen, are filling world theaters with deafening chatters. The audience awaits our response and clarification.

It is true that some situations require letting deeds do the talking. But this does not excuse us from speaking up when truth is being kidnapped and deception takes its place. Masses need both a heartfelt speech, and a language of sense and sensibility, as well as, data and facts.

Delaying response allows your opponent to put you on the

defensive. And by the time you do respond, more charges are leveled rendering your response mute. If you choose the silent treatment and “no comment” strategy, it might be taken as an admission of guilt rather than a sign of wisdom or “I am not going to dignify your question with an answer” tactic.

Al-Jazeera channels were launched years before Alarabiya, Al-Hadath and Sky News came to the scene as a response. Today, the Arab mind has many options and choices to choose from.

In the print media, Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat came ahead of other pan-Arab dailies, such as Egyptian Al-Ahram and the Lebanese Al-Nahar. Qatar has recently published its own papers in London — Al-Quds Al-Arabi, Al-Khaleej Al-Jadeed and the Al-Araby Al-Jadeed — but these have not been widely accepted.

They lost much ground when they followed the example of Al-Jazeera — closely and patriotically following Qatari news. For long, they avoided such local coverage to pretend neutrality and appear as a pan-Arab medium.

In addition, cyberspace accommodated hundreds of press sites. Saudi Arabia and Qatar took the lead. The difference being, our media are licensed by the Ministry of Media, and based here. The Qatari media do not associate themselves with Qatar and are published mostly in Europe, USA, Turkey and Lebanon. The idea is to claim neutrality, and spare their owners any responsibility for offensive content.

The so-called “Arab Spring” tested such claims and pretense. Unfortunately, most Arab media failed the test as they took sides and became tools for misinformation.

Today, we are facing a fierce global campaign from the Iranian-Qatari media. Iran has launched dozens of channels in Arabic, while Al Jazeera is keen to reach the international audience through its English version.

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Except for few Arabic or Urdu newspapers and channels, we have not made enough effort to reach out and present our views, show our progress and challenge stereotyping.

One obstacle is the difference between our commercial media

and their state or party-supported press. It is hard to convince a private corporation to provide a free service that won't be supported by advertising/subscription unless there is enough state help.

This could be solved by providing needed facilities, contributing to expenses and encouraging state companies to direct a good part of their marketing campaigns to our media.

As a result of our absence from the world arena, the enemies have achieved strong penetration into a wide audience base and influence over some human rights organizations, UN agencies, governments and parliaments.

They have managed to redirect accusation and criticism away from Iran and Qatar's practices and crimes against humanity to our way — based on biased information and media. This way, they put us on the defensive for so long that we lose much initiative and credibility.

What is required today is a complete review of our media vision (if we have one!) to take its right place in the National Transformation Plan and the Saudi Vision 2030, in coordination with the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab and Islamic concerned agencies.

Whether the platforms are commercial or public, they should have clear objectives, precise mechanism, and adequate support. We should take into consideration the difference between Arab and foreign audiences. Different cultures need custom-made messages — not one-size-fits-all.

This is a huge project and it may take a long time, but the thousand-mile trip begins with one step. I call on the Minister of Information Turki Shabana to bring around the table the best Saudi and Arab media experts.

Their assignment should be to draw a road map for our media and to oversee its implementation. Lets not wait a minute longer —the world is asking ... the world is listening!

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