



Al Jazeera's Complex Legacy: Thresholds for an Unconventional Media Player from the Global South

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The rise of Al Jazeera has left an indelible mark on Middle East politics, invigorated the region's media landscape, and introduced new dynamics in global media flows and international communication. The recent unsettling developments in the Middle East, however, have altered the media dynamics on which Al Jazeera thrived all along. Taking heed of the ongoing transformation of the Arab media landscape and the geopolitical reconfigurations of the region in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, this article explores growing tensions and conflictual pulls that are redefining the network and compelling it to change.

Keywords: Al Jazeera, media, international communication, Middle East, Global South

A political history of the modern Middle East in the post-9/11 era is probably incomplete without reference to Al Jazeera, a small Arabic news channel that emerged out of the Persian Gulf microstate of Qatar in 1996 to become an ambitious media player with an international reach. Working outside the straight and narrow of the region's conformist tradition, it captured the attention of Arab viewers, proclaiming itself as a champion of press freedom and an advocate for democratization in an Arab Middle East that has long been marked by its enduring authoritarianism and its aversion to change. Over the years, Al Jazeera acquired considerable media and political clout, which increased its visibility but also embroiled it in controversy. Two decades after its launch, Al Jazeera—which evolved into a sprawling network and a well-recognized brand—continues to be an important though ambiguous player in Middle East media and politics.

Significantly, the Middle East itself, which the network has covered so intensely over the years, is in the throes of change. It can be argued that the unprecedented turmoil that swept through the region since the 2010–2011 revolts has thrust Al Jazeera anew to the fore, or that Al Jazeera managed to use the interest in these uprisings to sustain an eroding news leadership. In either scenario, the popular upheavals and geopolitical mutations the region has been experiencing are not without effect on Al Jazeera. The reverberations of the uprisings are arguably altering the kind of media dynamics and political

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configurations on which Al Jazeera has thrived all along. At the very least, they are reconfiguring key variables that have traditionally defined the network.

This article explores how these evolving dynamics have impacted the network, in particular, the Arabic mother news channel. In considering the impact of the political changes the region has experienced on Al Jazeera's standing in the region and the implications of broader media and communication developments on the network's ability to retain its prowess, this article seeks to complicate our understanding of a global media player that is often perceived as operating outside Western normative models (in terms of both the kind of journalism it espouses and the business model it is based on), especially given that Al Jazeera is increasingly falling within these models when it comes to editorial matters, media strategy, and technology adoption, operation, and processes. Underlying the renewed interest in the case of Al Jazeera is also an attempt to understand what the rise and evolution of this unconventional media player, and the challenges it has been facing, reveal about communication, power, and politics in the Global South.

Before delving into the complex legacy of Al Jazeera, the article provides a brief overview of its development for any readers who may be unfamiliar with its trajectory. It outlines three defining stages in the history the network: the formative phase, the expansion phase, and the Arab uprisings (and their aftermath) phase. It then focuses on a number of "conflictual pulls" that came to characterize Al Jazeera Arabic in light of its trajectory in the evolving Arab media sphere, but also in view of sociopolitical changes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The article concludes with reflections on what these changes may mean for Al Jazeera's media model and what implications they may have on its outlook.

Milestones for an Unconventional Player

In many ways, the rise of Al Jazeera is intriguing. More than modernizing Arab-language broadcasting in a part of the world where, historically, freedom of expression has been venturesome and the press cowed, Al Jazeera introduced a new culture of journalism that revolutionized Arab news media altogether. A number of factors contributed to Al Jazeera's initial success: ample financial resources, a wealth of human capital, and a high ceiling of freedom of expression. Conceived as an "independent" state-sponsored broadcaster, Al Jazeera is generously funded by Qatar, a wealthy Gulf monarchy with tremendous natural resources. At the outset, the network was supported by a multiyear grant with the expectation that it would eventually reach solvency. As Al Jazeera became more widely watched and grew more influential, that arrangement practically turned into a rolling grant, although there are signs that the network is attempting to develop and adopt a self-sustaining business model. Several members of the initial core group that joined Al Jazeera when it was set up in Doha had BBC experience, having left London after the Saudi-BBC News joint venture closed down. Over the years, Al Jazeera managed to attract regional and international talent. Part of its appeal, in fact, a key asset in its success, is the unprecedented margin of freedom its journalists have enjoyed, which has enabled them to tackle issues considered taboo and to venture into topics with a level of openness rarely attempted by the region's tame media and daunted press (Zayani & Sahraoui, 2007, pp. 23-34).

Al Jazeera may not have been initially conceived as a political project, but it was inevitably political from the outset considering its focus on news and current affairs in a geopolitically complex and conflict-ridden Middle East. Over the years, it proclaimed itself as a democratizing power in a region long marked by its enduring authoritarianism and its aversion to change. Expectedly, Al Jazeera Arabic riled many Arab governments that saw their ability to control the flow of information eroded, their authority diminished, their political wisdom challenged, and their legitimacy undermined (Zayani, 2005, pp. 3–4). In much the same way Al Jazeera came under fire for stirring trouble by probing the internal political affairs of Arab countries long used to the government controlling the public narrative, it unnerved several Western nations. Since it caught the world's attention with the airing of the Bin Laden tapes shortly after the 9/11 attacks, it was stigmatized as a propaganda channel. In the United States, it gained a negative reputation as a supporter of anti-American hatred. The Bush administration publicly criticized the network and U.S. officials tried unsuccessfully to pressure the emir of Qatar to curb it.

As much as Al Jazeera Arabic has been loathed by Arab regimes and criticized by Western governments, it was wildly popular among the many Arab viewers who were drawn to its style of journalism (El Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003, pp. 25–26). Proximity to zones of conflict, extensive coverage of critical events, aggressive pursuit of information, instinct for breaking news, and keenness to provide daring political commentary that matters to the Arab world—all these factors aided its meteoric rise. Overtime, Al Jazeera acquired the distinct ability to influence public opinion on internal Arab issues as well as on broader matters of foreign policy. Its growing influence prompted intense regional and international competition to win the hearts and minds of Arabs that resulted in the launch of a number of transnational Arabic-language news media channels (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009, p. 84).

The prowess of the Arabic news channel emboldened it to grow and expand. It thus grew organically, and strategically, morphing from a modest Arabic-language channel, beamed from a small compound in Doha, into a multichannel, multiplatform, multilanguage network with a global audience and offices throughout much of the world. The network established a strong online presence through its Arabic and English websites and launched a series of specialized channels, including Al Jazeera Sport (later rebranded as the independent BeIN Sports, following concerns that hostility to the brand could jeopardize its profitability), Al Jazeera Children, Al Jazeera Documentary, Al Jazeera Mubashir, and most prominently perhaps Al Jazeera English. Al Jazeera prides itself on having a particular brand of journalism it managed to take beyond the Arab world—to the Balkans, Africa, and beyond. Having failed for years to penetrate the North American TV market and to cope with the distribution challenges it faced (Davis, 2013), Al Jazeera launched its own U.S.-based channel following a takeover of Al Gore's Current TV network, although, after three years in operation, the network announced that it is shutting down Al Jazeera America, an expensive operation that did not manage to get the visibility, audience share, or agenda-setting power it hoped for (Koblin, 2016; Starkman, 2014; Youmans, 2016). Capitalizing on its success, Al Jazeera also set up its Media and Training Development Center to export its "journalism DNA," and established its own think tank, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, to enhance its policy-focused research capacity in the MENA region.

During the early phase of the Arab uprisings, particularly 2011–2012, Al Jazeera was an important force and an active player. The historic events that shook Tunisia and Egypt were powerfully—

and sensationally—captured on the airwaves of Al Jazeera. The fall of two impregnable regimes inspired people in other Arab countries to rise up, from Libya to Bahrain and from Syria to Yemen. All along, Al Jazeera was in the thick of these unprecedented events, providing an aggressive reporting that relied on a strong journalistic presence on the ground, extensive use of social media, and first-hand accounts from citizens and activists that challenged the official state narrative (Bashir, Netzley & Greiner, 2012, pp. 26–27).

During the wave of protests that swept the region, Al Jazeera was more than a limp witness to history: More than cover the uprisings, it championed them. The instantaneous global reach of Al Jazeera's split screen, which featured simultaneous large-scale popular protests in many Arab nations, constituted a precious moment of triumph for a network that became associated with people's struggle for change, leading some observers to claim that Al Jazeera was drumming up support for the popular rebellions (Nasr, 2014, p. 398), and prompting others to question whether the Arab uprisings could have happened without Al Jazeera (Ricchiardi, 2011). Not surprisingly, Al Jazeera became a target during these popular upheavals: Its signals were repeatedly jammed during its coverage of the Arab uprisings, its reporting was vilified in Tunisia, its offices were raided in Yemen, its reporters were imprisoned in Egypt, and one of its cameramen was killed in Libya.

The initial Arab uprisings were a high point in Al Jazeera's history. Its reporting on social protests in Tunisia, at a time when Arab dictators seemed invincible, and its coverage of the massive demonstrations in Tahrir Square against the Mubarak regime were riveting for audiences and "helped propel insurgent emotions" across much of the Arab world (Worth & Kirkpatrick, 2011, para. 1). Commenting on the role Al Jazeera played in the revolts, the network's former general manager, Waddah Khanfar noted, "Al Jazeera is not a tool of revolution; we don't create revolutions. When something of that magnitude happens, we are at the center of the coverage" (2011 [Ted Talks video clip]). What Al Jazeera was able to do, according to Khanfar, was plant the seeds of change by "liberating the Arab mind" (Edwards, 2011, para. 17). Khanfar, the longest serving director at the network (2002–2011), was a force behind the expansion and transformation of the network. A charismatic leader with a grand vision for where he wanted to take Al Jazeera, he was largely perceived as having "created a brand with a fairly clear agenda" (Edwards, 2011, para. 22), "put the network on the global map" (Black, 2011, para. 11), and "led it to its greatest triumph" (Stebbins, 2011, para. 2). Ironically, the initial uprisings that altered the course of Arab history were also anticlimactic for Al Jazeera. Inevitably, the setbacks to the prodemocracy revolts and the unprecedented chaos the region descended into affected Al Jazeera's fortunes (Saeed, 2016, para. 6).

Conflictual Pulls

Al Jazeera is certainly not without shortcomings, excesses, and blind spots. For years, the channel's many critics have pointed out such issues as lack of objectivity, lapses of professionalism, editorial bias, advocacy style, sensationalism, and political agenda. Two decades after its launch, however, Al Jazeera Arabic stands out less for its excesses—even if a number of these persist—than for a set of conflictual pulls that have come to characterize it and affect its trajectory. These pulls point to tensions within the network, but also reflect reconfigurations the MENA region has been experiencing

more broadly since the start of the Arab uprisings. In the following section, I dwell on four of these tensions, which manifest themselves primarily in relation to the Arabic mother channel. The first is between professional journalistic imperatives and the politics of representation, the second is between the strong pan-Arab current in Al Jazeera and the encroachment of sectarian politics into the region, the third is between the editorial policy imperatives of the network and the foreign policy exigencies of its sponsor (or between editorial power and soft power), and the fourth is between the network's aspiration to mainstream stature and its desire to retain an alternative edge.

The Politics of Representation

One of Al Jazeera's signature traits is its blunt journalism. This is evident in its unabashed use of images as a representational discourse that transcends the stories themselves. The screen of the Arabic news channel in particular is rife with violent scenes and constantly brimming with gruesome images. The channel has no timidity about displaying death, destruction, and suffering. From Iraq to Lebanon, from the Palestinian territories to Sudan, and from a war-torn Syria to an imploding Libya, Al Jazeera thrives on translocal conflicts, wars, crises, and debacles. In all of these instances, it seeks to establish its "eyewitness authority" through explicit and unrelenting visual coverage that feeds on "graphicness" in a proclaimed attempt to depict reality "as it is" (Zelizer, 2010, p. 15).

How these images are consumed is not all that clear. The sporadic audience research that exists suggests that part of Al Jazeera's appeal in the Arab world is indeed its very tendency not to downplay events (S. Fahmy, 2007). Shielding audiences from images of violence and holding back on graphic footage, as expected from media in the West, means giving them less than a full and complete account of what is happening on the ground. Such graphic forms of representation as seen on Al Jazeera seem to have provoked popular outrage and fed street activism, although, over time, they also could conceivably have the opposite effect and induce numbness, fatalism, and fear.

Al Jazeera not only claims that the suffering of the (often underprivileged and underreported) subjects it focuses on is worthy of reporting, and also aligns itself with those subjects and identifies with their suffering. These dynamics bear on the notion of objectivity. Al Jazeera takes pride in being the "voice of the voiceless." In particular, it pays attention to and reports on marginalized groups, disenfranchised entities, nonstate actors, and unconventional players. Whether it is reporting on the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hizbollah in Southern Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Houthis in Yemen, the Shites in Bahrain, or the Rohingya in Myanmar, Al Jazeera has from the outset given prominence to the politics of the Other. A common theme that binds the channel's coverage and many of its programs is that power dynamics are more malleable than they seem, that power relationships are not stable and could change, and that power politics are not necessarily the purview of conventional players.

From the network's standpoint, if Al Jazeera is biased, it is biased toward "the truth." Some scholars have defended Al Jazeera's brand of journalism and its tendency to express Arab views as "contextual objectivity" (El Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002), and others have criticized it for its slanted views. Effectively, Al Jazeera's keenness on advocating the "view and the opposite view," which is also its motto,

entails a full acknowledgement of the Other—the underdog, the oppressed, the oppositional, and the subaltern.

If Al Jazeera Arabic pursues such a blunt editorial line, its twin Al Jazeera English adopts a more nuanced approach. Compared with its more controversial, emotive, and ideological Arabic-language news channel, Al Jazeera English is more sober and less excessive, although “far from being perfect” (Seib, 2012, p. 2). Whereas Al Jazeera Arabic focuses on the MENA region, the English channel offers a global perspective and caters to a broader, more international audience. According to a former network staff member, the English channel “was established as a wholly separate entity as a repudiation of what were considered to be the excesses of Al Jazeera Arabic,” and in that sense could be seen as having contributed to “burnishing the brand’s international reputation” (Stebbins, 2011, para. 20). Although over the years the management of Al Jazeera sought to bridge the gap and to achieve some coherence between the English and Arabic news cultures, the two channels remain distinct in terms of staff, programming, and editorial choices. Al Jazeera English feels closer to Western news services, although some observers suggest that it offers more depth, scope, and passion (Kaplan, 2009).

This is where the perspective of the “South” the network claims to offer comes into play. One of the proclaimed aims of Al Jazeera English is to balance the global flow of information and to provide an alternative perspective on international events and to cover stories differently from what is aired on Western news services such as the BBC and CNN (Figenschou, 2013). It does so by balancing West-centric news with traditionally marginalized regions and their stories. Distancing itself from the practice of parachute journalism, in which networks dispatch journalists on short assignments who may not have deep knowledge of the terrain and conflict they are covering, Al Jazeera invests in local journalists who have a good understanding of the complexity of the region they report on and a deep knowledge of its languages and societies. Al Jazeera claims that it has helped invigorate the culture of reporting internationally, and has over the years managed to build a core capability in covering stories that are typically undercovered by Western media. Significantly, whose reality is being reported and how it is represented make it difficult to disengage the question of representation from the politics of representation.

The Encroachment of Sectarian Politics

These issues are more insistent in the case of Al Jazeera Arabic. The channel’s influence comes from its ability to define issues, shape perceptions, and influence debates (Hroub, 2007, p. 251). Broadcasting in standard Arabic, Al Jazeera helped rekindle a shared Arab identity (Rinnawi, 2006). According to one of the network’s talk show hosts, Faisal Al Kasim (2005), Al Jazeera Arabic succeeded in doing what Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser failed to achieve decades ago: to bring the Arab masses together, and to foster a sense of unity among viewers across the Arab world and in the diaspora. The channel’s intensive coverage of the region—its focus on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, its extensive coverage of the invasion of Iraq, its coverage of the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah, its reporting on the incessant violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, its depiction of the plights of the Arab and Muslim world—has helped project notions of a common destiny for the Arab world. By claiming the right to have its own *mufti* through a weekly program on religion featuring the influential Egyptian-born cleric Yusuf al

Qaradawi for over a decade, Al Jazeera managed to make pan-Arab issues even more enmeshed with pan-Islamic issues (Graf & Skovgaard-Peterson, 2009).

Further consolidating this pan-Arab bent is the intense focus Al Jazeera maintains on reinvigorating social and political memory. Al Jazeera is as much committed to reviving the past as it is to reporting news and covering current affairs. The political consciousness that Al Jazeera has fostered is fueled by a pointed awareness of people's past experiences. There is a constant reiteration of past events, invocation of distant times, and reference to "high moments" in Arab history. The network's coverage of the contemporary Middle East underscores this historical exigency such that the present is constantly presented as an integral part of the past.

At the same time, Al Jazeera seeks to renegotiate unquestioned orthodoxies. Thus, on Al Jazeera, the problem of illegal Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories is only the most recent manifestation of the plight of the Palestinian people, which both recalls and reenacts the 1948 *Nakba* (or catastrophe). Likewise, for the network, Al Qaeda is not simply a radical new ideology that breeds terrorism; it is also the manifestation of complex geopolitical dynamics that can be traced back to the Cold War and the legacy of historical Western dominance and struggle that extends back to the Crusades.

Yet, the notion of "Arabness" Al Jazeera feeds on is far from being static. The older brand of pan-Arab nationalist identity, state-led and focused on unification schemes, has been undermined, and more recent forms of pan-Arabism are caught up in the growing state-society rift of so many Arab nations today (Ryan, 2012). In recent years, ideological conflicts have become rife and subregional identities stronger than ever before. Likewise, ethnicities and sects have become more pronounced. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, old tensions resurfaced and new rifts emerged, with the Sunni-Shia divide stoking internal tensions and fueling regional conflicts (Farha, 2016). From Yemen to Syria and from Bahrain to Iraq, sectarianism is contributing to the rising tension and increased instability in the entire region. The victories of Islamic parties in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt in the months following the 2010-2011 revolts entailed other tensions, particularly between secular and religious views. Not only has reporting on these exacerbating tensions been tricky, considering state interests and regional politics, but audiences themselves have grown more conscious of these rifts. The hopeful notion of a unified or all-encompassing Arab identity that made Al Jazeera a truly transnational Arab channel and gave it a wide appeal, along with its hints of a common Arab destiny, is giving way to a more fractured reality.

When Freedom of Speech Is a Double-Edged Sword

The ceiling of freedom that distinguished Al Jazeera Arabic throughout the years has always been a source of pride for the network. Increasingly, however, Al Jazeera is finding it difficult to maintain this competitive edge. As information is becoming more widely available, as censorship is proving increasingly hard to exercise, as more Arab channels are pushing the boundaries of what can be said publicly, and as official government narratives are being increasingly challenged by an energized Arab media sphere, Al Jazeera's ability to speak out on issues is no longer such a mark of distinction. This is all the more so considering the ubiquity of satellite TV, increased competition between various regional media players, and the changing expectations of audiences.

During the early months of the uprisings, the network was championed as a supporter of people's desire for change and was hailed as a game changer (Pintak, 2011). Ironically, the active role Al Jazeera played during the early months of the uprisings and its intensive coverage of the popular movements in 2011 brought challenges to its dominating status. Not only was there notable audience fatigue, particularly with the aberrations and setbacks that followed the initial phase of the Arab revolts, but the very changes the uprisings brought about gradually made Al Jazeera less relevant. The biggest challenge has been audience fragmentation. Internally, this could be one of the consequences of Al Jazeera's decision to launch specialized channels. Seen from a broader perspective, the issue is related to evolving audience habits and changing expectations as new regional competitors are beginning to emerge. With newly gained freedoms since the uprisings, more open discussions and more innovative programs have found their way to the airwaves of new and existing Arab channels. There is an increasing desire among Arab audiences to learn more about local and national events than transnational events. And so Al Jazeera found itself competing to claim a voice in a changing media environment that it helped shape in the first place. In today's hybrid media environment, this open and dynamic sphere has been further enhanced by better access to the Internet, the appropriation of various forms of alternative media, the intensification of social media usage, and the appeal of citizen journalism ("Media Use," 2015). No less significant is the ability of state television and local channels to reclaim audiences in many of the countries that have witnessed political change. Capitalizing on their ability to report on local and national news better than transnational Arab channels, various domestic media players are increasingly competing with Al Jazeera for audiences.

The Conundrum of State Security

Previously, Al Jazeera has been criticized mainly by governments. In the months that followed the unexpected fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Gaddafi in Libya, attitudes toward the network also started to change among the general public in the countries that had gone through revolutionary change. Not only has the network been severely criticized for its perceived agenda, which initially favored the rise of political Islam, but its state sponsor also came under heavy attack (Coates-Ulrichsen, 2014). The relationship between Al Jazeera and Qatar has been well noted, although the evidence for the extent to which the foreign policy choices of the host country influence Al Jazeera's editorial policy remains unclear (Samuel-Azran & Pecht, 2014). Al Jazeera's repeated insistence on its independence notwithstanding, the network is in essence a media venture that is based in Doha and sponsored by Qatar, a Gulf state with immense oil and gas resources that has in recent years strived to brand itself as a forward-looking microstate (Peterson, 2006). There is a widely held perception among the public and scholars that Qatar uses Al Jazeera to wield political power. For Powers (2013), Al Jazeera is an example of how "communication technologies can be deployed in ways that shift diplomatic practice and geopolitical power" (p. 210). For Samuel-Azran (2013), Al Jazeera represents "a new model of public diplomacy" (p. 1293); the hybrid nature of the network, being both "state-sponsored" and "private" (p. 1307), helped the host country develop a communications strategy that puts international broadcasting at the service of public diplomacy.

For Al Jazeera's many critics, however, these issues bear directly on the network's independence and the kind of journalism it practices. Several U.S. diplomatic cables revealed by WikiLeaks reported

details of a meeting between embassy officials in Doha and Al Jazeera's former general director, revealing that the network was at some point willing to yield to external pressure. Although openly claiming independence and voicing criticism of U.S. foreign policy in the region, behind closed doors the network allegedly agreed to tone down what was deemed by its Western critics as troublesome material on its website. Shortly after these revelations were made public, Al Jazeera announced a change in its senior management, a move that recalls the resignation of its founding general manager a few years earlier, following the alleged infiltration of Al Jazeera by Iraqi agents (Miles, 2005, pp. 289–294). In another high-profile WikiLeaks diplomatic cable, a confidential U.S. embassy report concluded that Al Jazeera had proved itself "a substantial source of leverage for . . . its political masters" (U.S. embassy cables, 2009, 21.C; Chatriwala, 2011). Al Jazeera has repeatedly dismissed these claims, however, continuing to insist on its independence. At the very least, we can ascertain that Al Jazeera's media clout is in sync with Qatar's strategy to play an active role in Middle East politics, to gain regional influence, and to attain international visibility (Kamrava, 2013, pp. 69–89). The prowess of Al Jazeera in a geopolitically tense region has helped give Qatar a notable political weight in the Middle East.

Although it is hard to ignore the affinity between the network and its sponsor, it is important to note that the relationship between the two is subtle. The fact that Al Jazeera grew to be a complex institution with its own internal dynamics means that any insightful analysis needs to go beyond the simple question of "whether [it] works in a coordinated manner with respect to Qatar's interests or whether [it] maintains a separate agenda" (Samuel-Azran & Pecht, 2014, p. 220). For Lamoum (2004), if Al Jazeera is to serve its owners well, it needs to maintain its editorial independence and distinguish its editorial line from the political agenda of its sponsor. Seen from this perspective, the apparent contradiction inherent in the very conception and strategy of Al Jazeera—as both a foreign policy tool at the service of state interests and as a rebellious voice in support of Arab causes—may be considered a case of *realpolitik* that has paid political dividends, so far.

Although this *modus operandi* helped position Al Jazeera at the center of the historical transformations the Arab world witnessed in 2011, the subsequent twists and turns in the Arab uprisings are not without potential implications for the network. In a fast changing, conflict-ridden region, Qatar's most valuable political asset could potentially turn into a liability of sorts. Al Jazeera's reporting on the popular movements in Arab countries where, at one point or another, its host country had military involvement (as in the case of Libya), geopolitical stakes (as in the case of Syria), and mediation initiatives (as in the case of Yemen) proved to be an uneasy challenge. As conflicts within the Arab world deepened, particularly as more countries began to experience difficulties and unsettling setbacks in their transitions, Al Jazeera's coverage drew critical attention in these countries, and the Arab world's more general attitude toward Al Jazeera Arabic started to change.

The network's critics were quick to point out what they considered to be inconsistencies in its coverage and bias in its reporting, suggesting that even for Al Jazeera, "free press has its limits" (Miles, 2011, para. 16). Many observers have pointed out the noticeably thin coverage of the protests that flared up in the neighboring Gulf kingdom of Bahrain on the Al Jazeera Arabic news channel (Ennasri, 2013, pp. 115–116; Erdbrink, 2011), which sharply contrasted with the intense and critical coverage of the developments in Egypt after the ousting of President Morsi and the ostracizing of the Muslim Brotherhood

by the military establishment (Cherkaoui, 2014). What is more, Al Jazeera's coverage of the unfolding of events in post-Mubarak Egypt caused diplomatic difficulties, as the potential effects of developments in Egypt on the region's general stability, the Gulf states in particular, displeased and alarmed Qatar's neighbors. Although the diplomatic spat that erupted in 2014 between the Gulf states and Al Jazeera's state host eventually died down (Kholaf, 2014), it entailed some adjustments to the network's modus operandi. Al Jazeera announced at the end of 2014 that it was rolling back Al Jazeera Mubashir (or Live Station) in Egypt, which was banned a year earlier, and was incorporating it in a new regional offering ("Al Jazeera Suspends," 2014; M. F. Fahmy, 2015). Having for years enjoyed the soft power Al Jazeera wielded, the network's owners find themselves increasingly compelled to manage this complex asset.

Concluding Remarks

The rise of Al Jazeera undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the region's politics, heralded a new era in Middle East media, and introduced new dynamics in global media flows and international communication. With Al Jazeera celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2016, the pressing question does not simply concern the legacy of the network, but its continued relevance. What remains unclear is whether or not Al Jazeera has reached a nadir of influence. Such a prognosis would need to take heed of a number of considerations: first, the implications of the network's evolution from a regional Arabic-language news channel to an ambitious international media player with a global reach; second, the geopolitical reconfigurations of the region and the transformation of the Arab media landscape in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings; third, the uncertain prospects of profitability and the waning chances for unrivaled influence; and finally, the changes that the industry as such is undergoing in the age of the Internet and social media.

One of the potential implications of Al Jazeera's expansive drive is the tendency to lose its nonmainstream edge. The sheer fact that former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton praised Al Jazeera—referring specifically to the English channel—for being "effective," for reporting "real news" (Bauder, 2011, para. 3), and for producing good journalism situates the network closer to mainstream media or at least the expectations one has of mainstream outlets. This could presumably affect Al Jazeera's ability to be the voice of the voiceless, as it has traditionally claimed. Ironically, this presumed mainstreamness is precisely what Al Jazeera has, for years, defined itself against, as reflected in its indigenous nature, its antiestablishment ethos, and its alternative journalism, all of which have proven to be an inspiration for others—such as the Latin American news network teleSUR and China's CCTV News—to launch media ventures that challenge Western media hegemony, provide an indigenous frame, and offer an alternative perspective (Painter, 2007; Seib, 2007, pp. 32–36).

But there is more. Al Jazeera seems to be edging toward a mainstream model management-wise and content-wise, which has potential implications for "who it is" and "what it does." As financial considerations, market pressure, and technological innovation are bringing about changes in established media organizations around the globe, they are also compelling Al Jazeera to alter its modus operandi, and much differently from those of regional, political pressures. Commenting on Al Jazeera's decision in 2016 to scale back its operations and reduce its global staff, the acting director general, Moustafa Souag, noted that the network is looking for ways to evolve its business model as it may not be able to continue

to be heavily backed by its sponsor: "Other leading media organizations across the world are being forced to redefine their business models. . . . Al Jazeera is no exception" (Topham, 2016, para. 11). As the network evolves, it seems to be moving closer to the BBC model, the model from which Al Jazeera drew heavily at its inception. While remaining true to its mission, the BBC is increasingly aiming at generating alternative sources of income so as not to rely solely on taxpayers' money. Likewise, now more than any time in its past, Al Jazeera is conscious that it can no longer be content with being lavishly state-funded and that, to position itself well in the future, it will have to adapt in similar fashion. For some observers, the network's decision to close down Al Jazeera America in 2015 and its announced downsizing of its workforce in 2016 in the wake of the sharp drop in gas and oil prices may portend a new era in the Gulf that is characterized by the end of certainty (Coates-Ulrichsen, 2011). For others, however, the new management decisions the network is taking are suggestive of "a possible radical change in investment strategy" (Martinson, 2015, para. 1). Al Jazeera's corporate efforts to think creatively about how it can align its business strategy to its changing needs and realities give credence to the latter perspective.

Not only has the network attempted to streamline its operations and diversify its content but it has also sought to adapt to the changes the digital era brought about by getting audiences to engage both differently and more extensively with its content. The network's San Francisco-based start-up Al Jazeera Plus is indicative of Al Jazeera's ability to innovate. Launched in 2014, and aimed primarily at an expanding mobile-centric generation of avid social media users, this innovative media lab for digital storytelling engages audiences on various popular and emerging social media platforms, primarily through imagery-rich news stories and short documentaries on disenfranchised communities (Reid, 2015). By tailoring its news to a mobile-intensive environment and making it easily accessible to a younger generation of global online audiences, Al Jazeera is hoping to create opportunities to generate revenue. Capitalizing on its core capability to report news while setting an eye on the potential of the Internet, Al Jazeera is seeking to reinvigorate its model in such ways that would entail redefining the relationship between content providers and search engines so as to tap into an ever-expanding market of online readers and content consumers.

Such strategy entails being resourceful about the content the network offers and developing the ability to repackage it and resell it, but it also means venturing into uncharted territories. The network's global executive director of strategy and development, Yasir Bishr (2015), captured Al Jazeera's new mindset when he noted that, in the future, the Googles of the new digital era will have to pay to access and index content that news organizations such as Al Jazeera provide. Whether these ongoing changes lead the network to lose its edge, or induce it to reinvent itself and acquire a new relevance, remains to be seen. What is certain is that political considerations, economic challenges, technological innovation, and media conversion are compelling Al Jazeera to embrace a new mindset.

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