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Universiteit Leiden

**AL JAZEERA: A UNIQUE THREAT TO THE LEGITIMACY OF THE REGIMES
OF THE GULF REGION**

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Abstract

Since Al Jazeera was established, it has had an impact on Qatar's diplomatic relations, in particular since the Arab Spring. The tensions between Qatar and the other Gulf countries, however, came to a peak during the 2014 and the 2017 Gulf crises. Remarkable, is the central role of Al Jazeera in in these diplomatic crises, while the network is independent and only partly funded by the Qatari government. Therefore, this thesis researches the impact of Al Jazeera on Qatar's foreign relations. Through within-case analysis and process tracing this thesis illustrates how Al Jazeera, since its establishment, has evolved into a global news network that is considered highly controversial among the other Gulf states. By combining these results with the theories of the CNN-effect and the Al Jazeera effect, this thesis has been able to identify possible reasons why Al Jazeera has been a subject in these diplomatic crises. Lastly, this thesis also proposes an addition to the theory of multilevel analysis that allows for more accurate research into global news networks.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On May 18, 2020, two Al Jazeera journalists were released on bail from an Egyptian prison after they had been confined for allegedly broadcasting lies about Egypt on Al Jazeera and the illegal ownership of broadcasting equipment. The two men had been arrested in December 2013 and they were convicted to seven years in prison in January 2014.¹ According to the Egyptian court, working for Al Jazeera equaled membership of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is considered a terrorist group in Egypt since 2013.²

The general association of Al Jazeera with terrorist groups was not a new development. In the United States, Al Jazeera was also associated with a terrorist group after 9/11, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. At that time, Al Jazeera had broadcasted a clip of Osama Bin Laden, in which he took the responsibility for the attacks and stated that the attacks should be applauded by Muslims.³ This video would be the first out of ten. Throughout the years, these videos of Bin Laden were all broadcasted exclusively by Al

¹ "Egypt frees Al Jazeera staff jailed for journalism," Amnesty International, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/egypt-frees-al-jazeera-staff-mohammed-fahmy-baher-mohamed-prison-journalism>.

² "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood declared 'terrorist group'," BBC News, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25515932>.

³ Fouad Ajami, "What the Muslim World Is Watching," *New York Times*, November 18, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/18/magazine/what-the-muslim-world-is-watching.html>.

Jazeera. Osama Bin Laden was even considered Al Jazeera's unchallenged star.⁴ As a result, Al Jazeera was accused of having ties with Al Qaeda.⁵ This had given the channel a bad reputation in the West and in particular the United States, where Al Jazeera was described as a source of hateful propaganda and as biased and vicious.⁶

Furthermore, Al Jazeera was also considered 'inflammatory' and 'incendiary'.⁷ In the United States, it was considered to air controversial footage and, on its talk shows, put forward thought-provoking opinions.⁸ This, however, was something the network itself seemed aware of. In fact, on its own website, Al Jazeera was described as a network that 'challenged established narratives', provides an 'alternative voice' and follows 'principles and values that inspire to be challenging and bold'.⁹ According to observers, this is also what Al Jazeera has thanked its success to since it was established in 1996.¹⁰ They argue that in a short period of time, Al Jazeera has become the flagship media network of the Arab world and that it has earned great popularity by challenging the Arab establishment and for its role as a forum for free speech.¹¹ For this reason, scholars have argued that Al Jazeera represents an Arabic media revolution, because up to that point, the Arabic media had always been controlled by the Arab regimes. Al Jazeera, in contrast, evidently enjoyed a large amount of freedom that allowed it to become a progressive phenomenon.¹² Therefore, although partly funded by the Qatari government, the Al Jazeera network presents itself as an independent news organization.¹³

Through the years, while having gained popularity among the Arab public, Al Jazeera's reputation in the West had remained reprobate. This, however, according to scholars, changed in 2011, with Al Jazeera's sympathetic coverage of the protests of the Arab Spring. Suddenly Western governments and its population became more and more enthusiastic, praising the network for its high-quality journalism.¹⁴ While the West started to appreciate Al Jazeera, its coverage of the Arab Spring had the opposite effect on the regimes

⁴ Oren Kessler, "The Two Faces of Al Jazeera," *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2012): 48.

⁵ Kessler, "The Two Faces of Al Jazeera," 48.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ajami, "What the Muslim World Is Watching."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Who we are," Al Jazeera, accessed June 19, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/aboutus/>.

¹⁰ Nabil Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 251.

¹¹ Sam Cherribi, *Fridays of rage: Al Jazeera, the Arab Spring, and political Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 3.

¹² Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 251

¹³ "Who we are."

¹⁴ Kessler, "The Two Faces of Al Jazeera," 48.

of the Gulf countries. In particular, because according to these regimes, Al Jazeera's coverage of the protests was framed in favor of the uprisings.¹⁵ As a result, during the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera was banned reporting from both Tunisia and Egypt, which forced the network to film illegally and partly rely on footage shot by citizens on mobile phones.¹⁶

After the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera also remained a subject of controversy for the regimes of the Gulf states. These regimes considered Al Jazeera to be an instrument used by the Qatari government to influence public opinion in the Arab World.¹⁷ The situation has even deteriorated to such an extent, that the shutting down of Al Jazeera became one of the central issues in the 2014 and 2017 Gulf crises, in which Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar and even broke off all relations with Qatar.¹⁸ In a list of thirteen demands, the countries demanded the closure of Al Jazeera. A requirement that had to be fulfilled before any further negotiations would take place.¹⁹

The impact of Al Jazeera on Qatari diplomatic relations is questionable, since Al Jazeera is officially independent and only partly funded by the Qatari government. Therefore, the following question will be central in this thesis, 'How has the regional critique on Al Jazeera impacted the diplomatic relations of Qatar?' With this question, this thesis will set out to research Al Jazeera's relationship with Qatar and how this relationship has had an impact on Qatar's foreign relations. In the analysis, the thesis will aim to identify the underlying causes for this regional critique and why Al Jazeera has become a subject in Qatar's diplomatic relations.

This question will be answered by means of four sub questions and an analysis. The first sub question describes Al Jazeera as a network, in what media environment it was founded and what its relationship is with Qatar. In the second sub question, the background to Qatar's diplomatic relations with the other Gulf countries is discussed. The third sub question builds on the second, but instead focuses on Al Jazeera's role in these diplomatic relations. The final sub question describes the role of Al Jazeera in the 2014 and 2017 Gulf crises. In the analysis the information from the sub questions is applied to the existing body of theory in order to identify the underlying causes for the impact of Al Jazeera on Qatar's diplomatic

¹⁵ Larbi Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 124.

¹⁶ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 149.

¹⁷ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 57.

¹⁸ Tamara Qiblawi, Mohammed Tawfeeq, Elizabeth Roberts and Hamdi Alkhshali, "Qatar rift: Saudi, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt cut diplomatic ties," *CNN*, July 27, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/05/middleeast/saudi-bahrain-egypt-uae-qatar-terror/index.html>.

¹⁹ "What are the 13 demands given to Qatar?," Gulf News, accessed June 20, 2020, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/qatar/what-are-the-13-demands-given-to-qatar-1.2048118>.

relations. In the analysis, the validity of these theories will be tested and an addition to the theory will be proposed.

Research on the role of Al Jazeera in Qatar's diplomatic relations is important, because it is remarkable that an independent news network has an impact of this extent on a country's foreign relations. Through finding out why Al Jazeera has had this impact, this thesis provides more insight into the functioning of Al Jazeera and of a successful global news network of Arabic origin more generally. It is also important to add to the existing theoretical body because the theory on state-media relations is limited, while in fact, it is very useful for research on the role of the media in international relations. This theory offers a form of grip to researchers, by identifying specific aspects that should be of central focus in research on this subject. It provides a tool for more focused research into the relationship between the state and the media, thus improving the quality of this body of research.

Chapter 2: Design and methodology

Answering the research question of this thesis requires a deep understanding of Al Jazeera as a network and its relationship with Qatar. Therefore, an extensive set of secondary sources will be studied to provide the context for further analysis. The methods of research used in this thesis are within-case content analysis and process tracing. Within-case analysis as opposed to cross-case analysis, focuses on specific events and processes taking place within one specific subject of research.²⁰ In this thesis, Al Jazeera is the single case analyzed in the context of Qatar's diplomatic relations. The tool used as part of this within-case analysis is process tracing, which is defined as 'an analytical tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence – often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events and phenomena.' The diagnostic evidence used in the analysis of this thesis consists of conceptual frameworks.²¹ These frameworks will then be applied to data from secondary sources in order to contribute to the existing theory of media and international relations. The content analysis will be conducted by means of a combination of primary and secondary sources. The set of primary sources consists of documents such as a translated version of the Riyadh agreement by the CNN and a fact sheet from the Saudi government on 'Qatar's History of Funding Terrorism and Extremism'.

²⁰ David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *Political Science and Politics* 4 (October 2011): 823.

²¹ Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," 824.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

Research on the relationship between the media and international relations has long been limited. Through the years, however, several concepts have been developed to analyze the relationship between states and the media. In this thesis, the media is defined as journalistic news media with the goal of producing factual and objective news coverage of political, economic and social events. The media, as referred to in this thesis, consists of newspapers and media networks, including tv broadcasting and radio. The development of the theoretical body about state-media relations is important for research into the role of media in international relations. It provides insight into the influence of media networks, like Al Jazeera, on policymaking and society.

3.1 The CNN-effect

When the Cable News Network (CNN) started to grow, it was a unique phenomenon that was of high influence on global communications and international relations. Therefore, research on the relationship between media and the state started to increase.²² This has led to the concept of the CNN-effect. A theory based on the idea that media influences public opinion, through which public pressure is put on leaders to adopt the policy advocated by the media.²³ This theory ascribes much power to the media in the context of (inter)national politics and is considered a loss of policy control by the government. It focuses on a dependency of governments on the media for determining the political agenda.²⁴ The CNN-effect soon became a widely accepted theory, to the extent that a UN official once stated that “CNN is the sixteenth member of the Security Council.”²⁵

Through the years, the CNN-effect has been further developed, and new dimensions have been added to the theory. Eytan Gilboa, for example, has argued that the CNN-effect is based on a democratic model, but does not take into consideration a broader application of the concept. Furthermore, within this democratic model, he argues that it is assumed that the public closely follows the news, which, according to him, is not at all the case.²⁶ Therefore, he argues that research on the CNN-effect should also be extended to examine the direct effects

²² Eytan Gilboa, “The CNN Effect: The Search for a Communication Theory of International Relations,” *Political Communication* 22 (2005): 28.

²³ Gilboa, “The CNN Effect,” 38.

²⁴ Philip Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 63.

²⁵ Gilboa, “The CNN Effect,” 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

of global communication on policymaking independent of public opinion. Furthermore, he argues that networks the size of CNN reach the entire world. Therefore, research should also include the reception of global news in various parts of the world.²⁷

In another article, Gilboa and Robinson, together with Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert and Jason Miklian, further expand the research on the CNN-effect, by introducing multilevel interactions.²⁸ They argue that the local and regional dimension of the media should also be taken into consideration while studying the CNN-effect, since there are so many types of media nowadays, that the public is influenced by all levels of the media. To clarify, they provide the following example, ‘Pakistanis living in Norway may follow Pakistan’s engagement in the ‘War on Terror’ through Norwegian news channels and newspapers, but also through regional European and international news sources, and also or instead, through Pakistan-based news outlets.’²⁹

3.2 The Al Jazeera effect

Theory about the relationship between the media and international relations has not remained limited to the CNN-effect. In fact, with the increasing growth and success of Al Jazeera, Philip Seib has come up with the Al Jazeera effect.³⁰ According to this theory, the function of the media is expanding, in the sense that it is no longer just a one-way communication, like with the CNN-effect. Seib argues that, nowadays, media networks have a larger popular base which is more directly involved through live broadcasting and the use of the internet. Therefore, he argues that they have a relevant impact on international politics. An impact that changes the relationship between the government and the public.³¹ Seib even considers news organizations, such as Al Jazeera, as political actors because of their global reach and influence on public opinion. The Al Jazeera effect, however, focuses more specifically on influencing domestic and regional politics in the Arab World.³² In particular, in light of the political developments starting in 2011 with the Arab spring, Al Jazeera is often mentioned as advocate for democratization.

²⁷ Gilboa, “The CNN Effect,” 39.

²⁸ Eytan Gilboa, Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, Jason Miklian and Piers Robinson, “Moving media and conflict studies beyond the CNN effect,” *Review of International Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 655.

²⁹ Gilboa, Gabrielsen Jumbert, Miklian and Robinson, “Moving media and conflict studies beyond the CNN effect,” 660.

³⁰ Philip Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect: How the New Global Media Are Reshaping World Politics* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008), xii.

³¹ Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, 175.

³² Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 124.

In this thesis, these theories are relevant for the topic under discussion because they allow for a more in-dept analysis of the functioning of Al Jazeera regionally and globally. The CNN effect illustrates why a media network can form a threat to a regime because it theorizes how a powerful media network can cause loss of policy control for governments. The Al Jazeera effect is at the essence of this thesis because it focuses on the role of Al Jazeera in the Gulf region and even describes it as a political actor. Throughout this thesis these theories will be applied, and the conclusion and analysis will illustrate if they are justified. In the analysis, an addition to the theory will also be proposed.

Chapter 4: Literature review

The current academic debate on Al Jazeera is characterized by the question whether or not Al Jazeera serves as a public diplomacy tool for the Qatari government. Research is divided between those who argue that Al Jazeera is a mere instrument of Qatar, those who argue that Al Jazeera is completely independent and has even become a burden to Qatar and those whose arguments are more nuanced.

The book of Sam Cherribi falls under the last category. He recognizes why Al Jazeera could be considered an instrument of the Qatari government but argues that this is a simplistic view. He argues that although many themes covered at Al Jazeera are in striking alignment with Qatari foreign policy, such as the support of democratic Islamist movements, this does not necessarily make Al Jazeera the diplomatic arm of the Qatari government.³³ In particular, he states that Al Jazeera's journalists are in full control over the subject and scope of their reporting. Although Qatar might have had some influence on Al Jazeera's content, he argues that this has definitely not happened in 'the caricatured way portrayed by critics.'³⁴

Central in the academic debate is the concept of public diplomacy. This concept of media-state relations also stands at the basis of the theory of Tal Samuel-Azran, in which he proposes a new form of media diplomacy to analyze the Qatar-Al Jazeera relationship. According to this model, the state-sponsored station, Al Jazeera, operates independently in routine affairs and only applies a state-sponsored-style of broadcasting during a crisis involving the state.³⁵ He argues that this allows Al Jazeera to maintain its credibility, while it allows Qatar to exert its influence when necessary. This is only possible, according to

³³ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 57.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Samuel-Azran, 'Al-Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy,' 1294.

Samuel-Azran, because Qatar is a micro-state with minimal direct involvement in international conflicts.³⁶

Philip Seib also builds on the theory of public diplomacy but leaves Qatar out of the equation. He argues that media in the Arab world has the task of taking over the political role normally fulfilled by political parties.³⁷ To back up this notion, he proposes a new theory of public diplomacy, in which not only nation states, but also non-state actors in the international sphere aim to persuade foreign audiences through the media. In the case of Al Jazeera, this theory suggests that the network functions as a political actor, using its power to influence the public.³⁸ He argues that compared to other major international media organizations, Al Jazeera is more politically motivated and therefore has developed particularly advanced marketing techniques to promote its network abroad.³⁹

In her article, Marwa Maziad takes this line of argument even further and argues that Al Jazeera might have originally been founded to provide Qatar with more influence, but that, through the years, it has ideologically been transformed causing Qatar to lose its grip over the network.⁴⁰ This transformation, she argues, has taken place through a form of slow Islamist insurgency within Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr, the Egyptian channel, which after its closure has shifted to Al Jazeera Arabic.⁴¹ This insurgency, according to Maziad, took place through the hiring of an increasing number of Islamist personnel, an argument she has substantiated with the confirmation of resigned Al Jazeera journalists.⁴² Finally, she argues that this has caused a clash of agendas between Al Jazeera and the Qatari government, which made Al Jazeera a burden to, rather than an instrument of the Qatari government.⁴³

Chapter 5: The media environment in the Arab World

The theory of the CNN effect is originally based on a democratic model. In 2005, however, Eytan Gilboa suggested that it should also take into consideration the role of the media in other non-democratic regimes.⁴⁴ The application of the theory in this thesis, therefore requires looking into the media environment in the Arab World.

³⁶ Samuel-Azran, *Al-Jazeera, Qatar, and New Tactics in State-Sponsored Media Diplomacy*, 1308.

³⁷ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 63.

³⁸ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Marwa Maziad, "Qatar in Egypt: The politics of Al Jazeera," *Journalism* 1 (2018): 2.

⁴¹ Maziad, "Qatar in Egypt," 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ Gilboa, "The CNN Effect," 38.

Until the 1990's, the Arab media mainly consisted of mobilized press controlled by governments.⁴⁵ Of this period, scholars have described the 1970s and 1980s as the worst decades for media freedom in the Arab World, because the Arab regimes were primarily focused on the controlling of free speech.⁴⁶ Governments executed this control by putting television channels, radio stations and print press directly under their control. This meant that these news outlets were owned, financed and run by the state. If one of these outlets was not under direct state control, it was usually owned by organizations directly connected to the government.⁴⁷ In this period, the media have been described as mere extensions of government information ministries.⁴⁸

Particularly relevant is the role of radio and television. The press was under government control, but its influence was only limited due to the widespread illiteracy rates in Arab countries.⁴⁹ The first radio stations were founded in the 1920s and television broadcasting was founded in the 1950s. Back then, however, most stations were already government run. The stations were used to positively reflect on government policies and performance, and government officials were frequent guests on the shows.⁵⁰ As a consequence, the media were seen as an extension of their governments. Scholars have argued that this broadcasting model was an autocratic version of the systems in France and Britain, where broadcasts were designed with an educational purpose.⁵¹ In the Arab World, this system indeed fulfilled a practical function, it was used to unify the country, preserve the centralized system of government and hold control over the people. Most of all, however, the broadcasting system functioned as a propaganda tool to ensure that no opposing or critical opinions became accessible to the public.⁵²

The conscious use and control of the media to preserve the status quo, had also made the Arab countries aware of their vulnerability in relation to the power of this same media.⁵³ With the arrival of satellite television at the end of the twentieth century, the Arab regimes lost some of this control as this development allowed Arab audiences access to non-Arab

⁴⁵ Gunter and Dickinson, *News Media in the Arab World*, 1.

⁴⁶ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 251.

⁴⁷ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 125.

⁴⁸ Barrie Gunter and Roger Dickinson, *News Media in the Arab World: A Study of 10 Arab and Muslim Countries* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 2.

⁴⁹ Gunter and Dickinson, *News Media in the Arab World*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Mohamed Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 14.

⁵³ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 252.

channels. These channels created awareness among the Arab public about the lack of diversity and quality on the state channels.⁵⁴ As a result, scholars have identified a new development in the Arab media. Arab States are inclined to more commercialization and privatization, but still consider the media to be a state-controlled public service. Therefore, a complex combination of both models has been introduced, in which networks are privately owned and publicly financed.⁵⁵

Chapter 6: The Al Jazeera Network and its relationship with Qatar

When Al Jazeera was established, the Arab media were largely controlled by the Arab states and they were mostly used in order to maintain their control.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, in this media environment, Al Jazeera was established in 1996, with the incentive of becoming a progressive and free media.⁵⁷ While Al Jazeera evidently runs an independent editorial line, it is partly funded by the Qatari government.⁵⁸ The following chapter will discuss the establishment of Al Jazeera as a network and its relationship with Qatar.

6.1 The Al Jazeera Network

Within the combined model of private and public ownership of media, new Arab media networks have been established. According to research, these channels provide an Arab perspective to new issues relevant to the Arab World and some even aim to compete with major international networks, such as the BBC and the CNN.⁵⁹ Al Jazeera is an example of such a new network and has been considered the precursor in this area.⁶⁰ With a financial contribution from the Qatari emir, it was established in 1996, with the goal of becoming a successful international news organization.⁶¹ The channel enjoyed a head start, as BBC Arabic had just collapsed, and the emir had recruited its staff members to work at Al Jazeera.⁶² Since its establishment, Al Jazeera has given a western style impression, its studios were decorated in a modern way, its presenters looked fashionable and its use of language and

⁵⁴ Gunter and Dickinson, *News Media in the Arab World*, 5.

⁵⁵ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 15.

⁵⁶ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 80.

⁵⁷ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 251.

⁵⁸ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 55.

⁵⁹ Gunter and Dickinson, *News Media in the Arab World*, 135.

⁶⁰ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 15.

⁶¹ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 55.

⁶² Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, 144.

music appealed to a contemporary audience.⁶³ Since then, Al Jazeera has managed to develop itself in becoming a critical voice in the Arab World. It soon became the leading regional media outlet and, according to some scholars, dominates Arab public discourse.⁶⁴ Its airtime consists of a twenty-four-hour news flow and live-debate talk shows.⁶⁵ Al Jazeera has put in place a five-member board which consists of senior staff members and journalists, which makes the key editorial decisions. Furthermore, a quality control panel was set in place which monitors programs along the established code of ethics.⁶⁶ In 2006, the channel became the Al Jazeera Network and Al Jazeera English was founded. Through the years, it has grown into one of the networks with the most channels in the world, consisting of more than twenty channels, among which AL Jazeera Balkans and Al Jazeera +. Furthermore, the network also expanded online, through AlJazeera.net.⁶⁷ This growth was possible because of Al Jazeera's 80 external bureaus around the world, with more than 200 reporters stationed in almost every country in the world.⁶⁸

The immense growth of the network was possible because of its widespread popularity. According to different surveys conducted in the Arab World, Al Jazeera has become one of the three most important news sources in the region.⁶⁹ Furthermore, research also confirmed that not only Al Jazeera was most popular, it was also considered essential by the Arab public for keeping up with world events. Only 10 percent of the those surveyed never watched Al Jazeera.⁷⁰ From the same set of surveys has also become apparent that Al Jazeera is generally considered the most trustworthy news source. In general, it had the reputation of being an honest and fair source for the provision of global news.⁷¹ According to analysts, this success can be attributed to Al Jazeera's coverage of Operation Desert Fox in 1998.⁷² At that time, Al Jazeera was the only broadcaster with camera crews on the ground in Iraq, which allowed the network to capture the attack like no other news organization could.⁷³ As a result, Al Jazeera was put on the global media map and was compared to international

⁶³ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 250.

⁶⁴ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 105.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 257.

⁶⁷ Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, 109.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 56.; Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 104.

⁷⁰ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 57.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 250.

⁷³ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 55.

news organizations, such as the CNN.⁷⁴ Through the years, its success grew to such an extent that international news organizations were paying Al Jazeera in exchange for its live footage from conflict areas in the Middle East.⁷⁵

This comparison with the CNN was not only made because of Al Jazeera's coverage of Operation Desert Fox. Scholars have argued that Al Jazeera's high-quality journalism and new approach towards Arab news, has allowed comparisons to be made between Al Jazeera and Western media.⁷⁶ Since its establishment, Al Jazeera has enjoyed the reputation of being a relatively free channel operating in the authoritarian Arab World.⁷⁷ According to Al Jazeera, the network's editorial team enjoys a high level of editorial freedom despite being funded by the Qatari government.⁷⁸ Al Jazeera's independence from the state is an aspect that the network has always emphasized and which it considers to be unique to the Arab World.⁷⁹ This policy of independency has provided Al Jazeera with the reputation of a network that cares for its public and that aims to serve the Arab community. According to observers, this reputation has improved the popularity of the network.⁸⁰

This popularity cannot only be accredited to the independent reputation of Al Jazeera. The network had also actively endorsed this status through openly discussing topics that are highly controversial in the region.⁸¹ Through the years, Al Jazeera had become the platform for Arabs with opposing views through which it, according to scholars, challenged the established political discourse.⁸² The topics discussed on Al Jazeera varied between political, revolutionary and religious subjects, which were debated on televised talk shows.⁸³ Instead of government officials, the guests on these shows were often individuals who challenged the status quo. They were encouraged to do so by a critical Al Jazeera host, who put controversial subjects to discussion.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, in the talk shows there was also room for the criticism of the Arab governments, which was then discussed and challenged.⁸⁵ Through this different approach, scholars have argued, Al Jazeera has managed to provide western style television

⁷⁴ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 55.

⁷⁵ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 251.

⁷⁶ Gunter and Dickinson, *News Media in the Arab World*, 135.

⁷⁷ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 2.

⁷⁸ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 70.

⁷⁹ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 125.

⁸⁰ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 70.

⁸¹ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 2.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 4.

⁸⁴ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 58.

⁸⁵ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 2.

through an Arab lens.⁸⁶ For this reason, they consider Al Jazeera to be a highly influential forum for resistance and critical opinion.⁸⁷ They also argue that as the leading regional media outlet, Al Jazeera determines the Arab social and political agenda and puts pressure on Arab governments, forcing them to adjust their policies.⁸⁸

6.2 The ideology of Al Jazeera

Despite praise for its high-quality journalism and western style approach, scholars do argue that Al Jazeera is led by a specific political ideology which stems from its Arab origins and the Arab lens through which it operates. In this way, they have argued, Al Jazeera has established an Arab narrative that is associated with pan-Arabism.⁸⁹ This regional approach can evidently be recognized through Al Jazeera's hiring of staff and use of language. Al Jazeera has employed a high diversity of Arabs from all over the Arab World, resulting in an Arab unity among its employees.⁹⁰ As a result, scholars argue, this sense of pan-Arabism is also projected in the general message of the network and the language that is used throughout its reporting. Al Jazeera only broadcasts in modern standard Arabic and therefore, they argue that Al Jazeera had created a sense of unity among its public, along with a core Arab narrative.⁹¹ This narrative closely hangs together with the rise of anti-Americanism in the region. Al Jazeera has, according to critics, created the image of the United States as the common denominator for the blood and misery in the region, an image strengthened by the conflicts in Palestine or Iraq.⁹²

Alongside a sense of Arab unity, scholars have also argued that Al Jazeera is a strong advocate for democracy. An assertion that is not only confirmed by its broadcasting, but also by different statements made by the network's editorial staff.⁹³ In general, Al Jazeera's broadcasting has been focused on representing different voices in society, in particular the ones that are normally left unheard. This approach stems from the idea that free media is a core aspect of democracy. Therefore, Al Jazeera considers it its goal to provide the Arab public with accurate information of what is going on in their region.⁹⁴ According to its staff,

⁸⁶ Gunter and Dickinson, *News Media in the Arab World*, 135.

⁸⁷ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 2.

⁸⁸ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 58.

⁸⁹ Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, 145.

⁹⁰ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 7.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, 145.

⁹³ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 65.

⁹⁴ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 125.

Al Jazeera is the leading institution in promoting democracy and human rights.⁹⁵ While this advocacy for transparency and freedom of speech in first instance does not seem to put any limitation to Al Jazeera's high-quality journalism, its coverage of the Arab Spring suggested the opposite.⁹⁶ According to critics, during the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera's advocacy for democracy overshadowed its value to high-quality objective journalism, as the network sided with the protesters and turned its back towards the authoritarian regimes.⁹⁷ This had led to the coverage of the Arab protests in 2011 that Al Jazeera has been praised for by the West and has fueled the network's popularity there.⁹⁸

This democratic goal is closely related to Al Jazeera's religious ideology which has also been called Muslim democracy or political Islam.⁹⁹ Scholars have linked this ideology to Al Jazeera's apparent religious overtones in its coverage of world events, through which, they argue, it constructs a transnational Muslim community.¹⁰⁰ An example these scholars have used to describe this religious message is Al Jazeera's regular advertisements for wearing a veil.¹⁰¹ This religious identity has not only been linked to Al Jazeera's support for the democratic Islamist movements during the Arab Spring, but also to its relations with extremist or terrorist organizations.¹⁰² These relations are mainly characterized by Al Jazeera's airing of tapes, not only from Al Qaeda, but also from other extremist groups.¹⁰³ Not only were these tapes broadcasted exclusively on Al Jazeera, the network was also the only media organization with possibility of interviewing Al Qaeda leaders, such as Saddam Hussein.¹⁰⁴

The combination of pan-Arabism, the Islam and democracy represent, according to scholars, Al Jazeera's political ideology. Even though it might clash with the network's policy of high-quality objective journalism, it does not seem to limit its credibility as a global news network. Sam Cherribi has combined all these aspects in one core ideology, which he called 'Islamized pan-Arabism'.¹⁰⁵ He describes the ideology as 'a reconciliation between pan-Arabism and Islamic solidarity,' two worldviews that originally were established to

⁹⁵ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 127.

⁹⁶ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 65.

⁹⁷ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 145.

⁹⁸ Kessler, "The Two Faces of Al Jazeera," 48.

⁹⁹ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 48.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 57.

¹⁰³ Kessler, "The Two Faces of Al Jazeera," 48.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 16.

counterbalance each other.¹⁰⁶ He argues, however, that the two ideologies are dependent of each other in order to survive the rise of extremist Islamic groups. In his view, Al Jazeera has managed to successfully combine the two in the central ideology of the network.¹⁰⁷

6.3 The relationship between Qatar and Al Jazeera

Another aspect that shapes the identity of Al Jazeera, is its connection to Qatar. During its broadcasts, it is continuously emphasized to the Arab public that Al Jazeera is a Qatari network aired from Qatar.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, several scholars have noticed a pattern in which Qatar is remarkably absent from Al Jazeera's critical news coverage.¹⁰⁹ They argue that while Al Jazeera has caused numerous political rows in the Gulf region, the network has not had any significant impact on the domestic politics of Qatar.¹¹⁰ In defense of its editorial policy, the network has argued that it could not focus on Qatar's insignificant internal affairs, while more important affairs were taking place in other countries in the region. In particular, because Al Jazeera was focused on regional and international audiences, reaching far beyond Qatar.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, critics argue that this might have been the case before 2011, but that since then significant Qatari affairs have come to light, such as gross human rights violations, which were still not covered on Al Jazeera.¹¹²

Other scholars go even further by suggesting that the Qatari government manipulates Al Jazeera in order to control Qatari society.¹¹³ They consider this a realistic possibility because the network, despite being considered independent, continues to be funded by the Qatari government. In fact, while it was established with an initial contribution of \$147 million, the network continues to receive a budget of \$30 million on a yearly basis.¹¹⁴ The ties with the Qatari government are not only financial. The chair of Al Jazeera's editorial board, for example, is a member of Qatar's ruling family.¹¹⁵ Therefore, critics argue that Al Jazeera might not be government controlled, but that the network only enjoys relative independence

¹⁰⁶ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 11.

¹⁰⁹ Maziad, "Qatar in Egypt," 9.

¹¹⁰ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 10.

¹¹¹ Maziad, "Qatar in Egypt," 9.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 10.

¹¹⁴ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 55.

¹¹⁵ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 17.

since it is government owned. They consider to be the price Al Jazeera has to pay for the editorial freedom it enjoys.¹¹⁶

The discussion on Al Jazeera's independence discerns domestic Qatari political issues as well as international and regional political matters. Al Jazeera's was established while internal political developments took place in Qatar, through which the country moved towards a more liberalized state. Al Jazeera was the main consequence of these developments in the media, where censorship was lifted.¹¹⁷ Scholars have argued that the establishment of Al Jazeera also fits with Qatar's goal of gaining more regional influence, in particular, through the media sphere.¹¹⁸ They support this claim, by stating that Al Jazeera's editorial policy and Qatar's foreign policy have striking similarities, in particular concerning the democratic Islamist movements and the open stance towards religious extremist organizations.¹¹⁹ In the case of Al Qaeda, scholars argue that a symbolic transaction has taken place between Al Jazeera, Qatar and Al Qaeda. This transaction has provided Al Qaeda with a legitimate news outlet to share its message, Al Jazeera with the exclusivity of this message and Qatar with national safety, because Al Qaeda has never launched an attack in Qatar. Observers consider this to be specifically remarkable since the United States Central Command is located in Qatar.¹²⁰

The similarities between Al Jazeera's editorial policy and Qatar's foreign policy have put to question the legitimacy of Al Jazeera as an independent network. Several scholars have discussed the possibility of Al Jazeera being used as an instrument of power by the Qatari government.¹²¹ This debate is based on the idea that Al Jazeera's broadcasting closely reflects the political agenda of the Qatari government.¹²² Within this debate, some scholars have argued that in the cases of conflict in both Syria and Egypt, Qatar changed its political position and Al Jazeera's coverage was changed in similar fashion.¹²³ Others, however, have argued the opposite, by stating that Al Jazeera's political discourse is incompatible with Qatar's foreign policy. They argue that friendly relations with neighboring countries is central

¹¹⁶ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 55.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 57.

¹²⁰ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 57.

¹²¹ Karim Pourhamzavi and Philip Pherguson, "Al Jazeera and Qatari Foreign Policy: A Critical Approach," *Journal of Media Critiques* 1, no. 2 (December 2015): 14.; Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 10.

¹²² Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 57.

¹²³ Pourhamzavi and Pherguson, "Al Jazeera and Qatari Foreign Policy," 14.

in Qatari foreign policy, which clashes with Al Jazeera's broadcasting of controversial issues, causing friction in the region.¹²⁴

Furthermore, it is also relevant to mention that the relation between Al Jazeera and the Qatari government is not unique. Scholars have identified a trend in which media ownership and politics are more often intertwined. Examples of this that are mentioned are Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's former Prime Minister, who is a developer of commercial TV and publishing in Italy and the Lebanese former Prime Minister Rafiq Al Hariri, who owns the satellite channel Future TV. These organizations, however, have not been subject to similar diplomatic crises as Al Jazeera.¹²⁵

Chapter 7: Qatar's diplomatic relations with the Gulf countries

Qatar is a small country in the Gulf region with around 700.000 inhabitants, of which only 150.000 are Qatari nationals.¹²⁶ The majority of the population consists of guest workers from Pakistan, India and other Arab countries.¹²⁷ In terms of per capita GDP, Qatar is the richest country in the world.¹²⁸ The country has accumulated its wealth with its oil and gas reserves through an economic boom in the 1990s.¹²⁹ Along with this prosperity, Qatar has also sought to increase its political influence region. In the following chapter, Qatar's development as a country, as well as its foreign policy will be discussed.

7.1 Qatar

Qatar is currently ruled by Sheikh Emir Tamim bin Hamad, the successor of Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, who ousted his father in 1995 after a bloodless coup.¹³⁰ Since he ascended to power, Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa attempted to liberalize and modernize the country. In 2003, he adopted a constitution, in which a new legislative body was established with the power to approve the national budget, to monitor the performance of ministers and to draft, discuss and vote on proposed legislations.¹³¹ The constitution also provided the Qatari population with public liberties, such as religious freedom, the independence of judiciary

¹²⁴ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 13.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁸ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 44.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 258.

¹³¹ Ibid.

power and the freedom of the press.¹³² The latter had already been enlarged in 1995, with the abolition of the Ministry of Information, allowing international media access to the country such as the New York Times, but also allowing the establishment of Al Jazeera.¹³³

Furthermore, the constitution provided women with the right to vote, drive, hold government office and it has boosted female participation at the Qatari university.¹³⁴ The reforms also consisted of the establishment of an elected body, the Advisory Council, which would consist of forty-five members of whom thirty directly elected.¹³⁵

The planned elections, however, have been announced numerous times over the years, but have not taken place until today. Furthermore, the actual democratic nature of the reforms is limited, as the constitution reserves executive power exclusively to the Emir, and political parties are forbidden.¹³⁶ Also, the power of elected officials is limited to municipal and agricultural matters and the media code of 1997 still treats criticism of the state as a criminal offense. Through this media code, the state has actually remained in control of the press, greatly limiting the production of free, objective news content.¹³⁷

7.2 Qatari diplomatic relations in the Gulf region

The reforms of Qatar did not remain limited to domestic issues, because the Emir implemented a policy of active international diplomacy. This policy became apparent through Qatar's growing mediating role in international disputes. Examples of this involvement include Qatar's role in mediating in the dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia, between Iran and Arab states, but also between the United States and Libya.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Qatar itself has also been part of several regional disputes through the years, which, according to research, have been characterized by the rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.¹³⁹

This rivalry originates in 1974, when the United Arab Emirates ceded territory to Saudi Arabia that was adjacent to Qatar. When Saudi Arabia wanted to deploy its forces on Qatari soil during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Qatar refused this, and even set up a border post, to assert its sovereignty in the area.¹⁴⁰ Through the years, these tensions led to a

¹³² Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 53.

¹³³ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 63.

¹³⁴ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 258.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 64.

¹³⁸ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 13.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁰ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 51.

border dispute that reached its height in September 1992, with the Khafous frontier post incident, which caused the death of two Qatari soldiers and one Saudi national. While the Qatari government described it as a Saudi attack, the Saudi government considered it a mere accident.¹⁴¹ As a consequence, Qatar suspended their 1965 border agreements and boycotted the next Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting, causing diplomatic tensions within the council.¹⁴²

During the 1994 Yemen civil war, Qatar took the opposite stance of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States. While the GCC countries were in support of the southern forces, Qatar took the side of the North, by stating that Yemen should remain one country.¹⁴³ This Qatari stance refrained the GCC from recognizing the South as official government of Yemen, again causing diplomatic tensions in the Gulf region.¹⁴⁴

This line of clashes with Saudi Arabia continued after the new Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa had ousted his father 1995. During the first year of his rule, the Emir had provoked a conflict within the GCC, by refusing to accept a Saudi nominee for the function of secretary-general. Furthermore, the Emir maintained good relations with Iraq and Iran, which was in strong contradiction with the policy of the GGC.¹⁴⁵ Tension worsened in 1996, when Qatar became the first Gulf country to establish trade relations with Israel, in order to provide it with natural gas.¹⁴⁶ These relations were established despite of strong reservations of Arab countries, who were at the time actually doubting their plans of expanding their economic ties with Israel. These reservations were caused by the strong stance of then newly elected prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu in the Palestinian peace process.¹⁴⁷ Saudi Arabia was particularly resistant to the plans, as the pipeline would have to go through its territory. Nevertheless, an Israeli trade office was opened in Qatar later that year.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, in 2002, the US Air Force moved their Gulf headquarters from Saudi Arabia to Qatar. This further fueled the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular, because the base guaranteed Qatar military protection against any possible intervention of Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁹ In

¹⁴¹ "Border incident fuels tension with Riyadh," *Middle East Economic Digest*, October 16, 1992, Factiva.

¹⁴² Jonathan Wright, "Qatar stays away from GCC defence meeting," *Reuters News*, November 14, 1992, Factiva.

¹⁴³ "Qatar minister in Oman, hopes Yemen stays united," *Reuters News*, June 19, 1994, Factiva.

¹⁴⁴ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 53.

¹⁴⁵ Peter Feuilherade, "Qatar takes a stand," *The Middle East*, September 1, 1996, Factiva.

¹⁴⁶ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 57.

¹⁴⁷ Feuilherade, "Qatar takes a stand."

¹⁴⁸ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 57.

¹⁴⁹ Julian Borger, "US paves way for war on Iraq," *The Guardian*, March 27, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/mar/27/iraq.julianborger>.

the following years, Qatar's diplomatic clashes mainly involved Al Jazeera, and this will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: The role of Al Jazeera in Qatar's diplomatic relations up to and during the Arab Spring

According to scholars, through the years, Al Jazeera has at least once been the subject of protest of most if not all Arab governments. In particular, because these governments consider Al Jazeera to be a threat to the stability of their regimes. As a result, Al Jazeera has been at the center of many disputes in the region, varying from small conflicts to entire diplomatic crises.¹⁵⁰ Researchers argue that the height of the tensions related to Al Jazeera were reached with the protests of the Arab Spring in 2011.¹⁵¹ Therefore, this chapter discusses the disputes of the Qatari government involving Al Jazeera from its establishment in 1996, up to the Arab Spring. The influence of Al Jazeera on the regional diplomatic relations allows for a closer look at the theory of the Al Jazeera effect, which suggests a role for the network as a political actor. Furthermore, this chapter also allows for the application of the theory of the CNN-effect, which indicates a loss of policy control by the ruling regimes.

8.1 Al Jazeera's role in Qatari diplomatic relations up to the Arab Spring

Since Al Jazeera's establishment in 1996, Arab states have continuously complained to the Qatari government about the network.¹⁵² Already in 1998, the Jordanian minister of information declared that he would shut down the Al Jazeera station in Jordan, if the government of Qatar would not take steps to prevent any more criticism of Jordan from being aired.¹⁵³ Later that same year, an article appeared in the Saudi press, called 'Arabsat and Another Kind of Pornography' in which Al Jazeera was deemed equally immoral as pornography. According to the article, Arabs watching Al Jazeera were subject to 'vicious and ferocious attacks against their values, principles and beliefs'.¹⁵⁴ The same article downgraded the network with the argument that it only hosted people who were not educated

¹⁵⁰ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 3.

¹⁵¹ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 149.

¹⁵² Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 3.

¹⁵³ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 58.

¹⁵⁴ "Saudi writer criticizes Qatari satellite station programmes," *BBC Monitoring Service: Middle East*, March 21, 1998, Factiva.

and qualified enough to discuss important subject such as religion.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, in 2001, the Saudi Crown Prince called Al Jazeera a disgrace to the GCC countries.¹⁵⁶

Saudi Arabia's criticism of Al Jazeera, however, was not only limited to negative publicity and threats. Besides Saudi officials speaking out publicly against Al Jazeera, its journalists were at one point even prohibited from reporting from within the country. Around the same time, watching satellite television in coffee shops had become prohibited, a measure most probably aimed at limiting the reach of Al Jazeera.¹⁵⁷

Another critic of the network is Kuwait. Along with Saudi Arabia, the country organized a boycott on businesses that advertised on Al Jazeera.¹⁵⁸ In 1999, Kuwait also made the decision, similarly to what Saudi Arabia had done years before, to ban Al Jazeera from reporting from its soil. This measure was triggered by an Al Jazeera talk show host who had allowed a viewer of a live call-in show to publicly criticize the Emir of Kuwait.¹⁵⁹

The country that has gone furthest to limit the influence of Al Jazeera is Algeria. Once, during a talk show in which the Algerian government was criticized for its human rights abuses during the country's civil war, the government felt forced to cut the power to several major cities to prevent the public from watching the episode.¹⁶⁰ In general, however, the most popular diplomatic response to the controversial nature of Al Jazeera was the withdrawal of ambassadors of Qatar. Over the years, a total of six countries, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Tunisia, Libya and Morocco, have at certain moments withdrawn their ambassadors from Doha as the result of what had been broadcasted on Al Jazeera.¹⁶¹

8.2 Al Jazeera's role during the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was a series of uprisings in the Middle East, and already with the first protests, which took place in December 2010 in Tunisia, Al Jazeera was present for coverage.¹⁶² In doing so, critics have argued that Al Jazeera took the side of the protesters by

¹⁵⁵ "Saudi writer criticizes Qatari satellite station programmes."

¹⁵⁶ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 56.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵⁹ "Kuwait bans Al-Jazeera television from reporting from Kuwait," *Associated Press Newswires*, June 21, 1999, Factiva.

¹⁶⁰ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 60.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶² Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 85.

being highly critical of the Tunisian media, calling it submissive and presenting it as ‘conspirators in the propaganda war against the Tunisian people.’¹⁶³

When the protests spread throughout the region, Al Jazeera provided extensive coverage of each of the revolutions. Scholars have argued that Al Jazeera has provided the ‘gunpowder’ needed to fire the people’s anger and join the mass demonstrations, for instance by showing government security forces using force against protesters, and graphic images of the blood-stained bodies of dead or injured protestors outside on the streets.¹⁶⁴ Through its coverage, scholars consider Al Jazeera to have contributed significantly to uniting the protest movements of different countries by presenting the revolutions not as separate movements, but as an encompassing regional event. For this reason, critics have even called Al Jazeera the ‘facilitator’ of the Arab Spring.¹⁶⁵

What has characterized Al Jazeera’s reporting of the Arab Spring, is the high presence of the network in the demonstrations. According to scholars, Al Jazeera presented itself not only as a news network, but also as an active participant in the protests.¹⁶⁶ They argue that Al Jazeera expressed solidarity for the demonstrations through motivational slogans such as ‘Egypt... people’s victory,’ accompanied by revolutionary music.¹⁶⁷ In particular in Egypt, Al Jazeera had managed to deploy an exceptional number of journalists on the ground. As the protests took place in many different cities all over Egypt, it seemed nearly impossible for any news network to cover every event. Al Jazeera, however, did already have one of the network’s largest bureaus in Egypt and therefore, was able to do so.¹⁶⁸

Al Jazeera’s extensive coverage and active participation in the protests was not simply accepted by the ruling regimes. In particular not by those of Tunisia and Egypt. In Tunisia, Al Jazeera had already been banned from reporting before the protests.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, Al Jazeera had managed to establish a network in Tunisia of ‘citizen journalists’ which allowed Al Jazeera to broadcast about the Tunisian revolution despite of the ban.¹⁷⁰ Al Jazeera took a similar approach in Egypt, where the network was also banned five days after the start of the protests. Not only did the Egyptian government ban Al Jazeera from reporting from the

¹⁶³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁶⁴ Sultan, “Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring,” 253.

¹⁶⁵ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 147.

¹⁶⁶ Cherribi, *Fridays of rage*, 91.

¹⁶⁷ Sultan, “Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring,” 256.

¹⁶⁸ Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 149.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 148.

country, it also attempted to block the entire reception of the network.¹⁷¹ It did not take long however, until the news was spread about the new frequency that Al Jazeera could be watched on. Furthermore, social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube were used to distribute the banned broadcasts of Al Jazeera.¹⁷² Despite of the ban, Al Jazeera was not stopped from capturing footage from Egypt. Journalists voluntarily decided to remove the Al Jazeera logos from their equipment and to continue filming. Alongside this footage, the network also relied on videos and images taken by mobile phones and spread via social media.¹⁷³

Among the Arab public and the West, Al Jazeera had gained much popularity during the Arab Spring. Among the Arab regimes, however, it had not. The belief that Al Jazeera was used as an instrument by the Qatar government, was only strengthened during this period.¹⁷⁴ The unrest surrounding Al Jazeera after the Arab Spring did not remain limited to external factors. Internally, Al Jazeera allegedly suffered many resignations of newsreaders, talk show hosts and journalists. Critics have argued that these resignations were the result of Al Jazeera's way of covering the Arab Spring, which some considered contrary to its original policy of high-quality objective journalism.¹⁷⁵

The active role ascribed by researchers to Al Jazeera in the Arab Spring seems to confirm the functioning of the network as a political actor as suggested by the Al Jazeera effect. During the Arab Spring, the measures, such as the banning of the station by Egypt in Tunisia, were directed at the network itself. Nevertheless, in earlier disputes, the Gulf regimes treated Al Jazeera as instrument of Qatar, a sentiment that was strengthened during the Arab Spring. Furthermore, although originally focused on democratic regimes, the CNN-effect suggests a loss of policy control of regimes because of the influence of the media. This theory can to some extent be recognized in the reactions of the Gulf states to Al Jazeera. They appeared to feel threatened by the network before and during the Arab Spring and considered it necessary to limit the reach of the programming of Al Jazeera in their countries.

¹⁷¹ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 253.

¹⁷² Sadiki, *Al Jazeera and Democratization*, 149.

¹⁷³ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 254.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁷⁵ Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," 260.

Chapter 9: The 2014 and 2017 Gulf Crises

Since the controversial reputation of Al Jazeera during the Arab Spring, it had become subject to different attempts of Gulf states at controlling the network. The tone had been set with the ban of Al Jazeera in Tunisia and Egypt, and while significant regime change had taken place in the meantime, the violent attitude in the region against Al Jazeera remained. Therefore, this chapter will not only focus on the role of Al Jazeera during the two Gulf Crises, but also on the period before the two crises, starting in 2012.

9.1 The 2014 Gulf Crisis

In the period right after the Arab Spring, diplomatic disputes involving Al Jazeera were mostly focused on Egypt. After the protests had toppled President Mubarak, Al Jazeera had established a station in Egypt, Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr.¹⁷⁶ In late 2012, however, discontent arose about the new President Morsi, which led to the spread of protests through Egypt. This time, however, the protesters were not protesting with, but against Al Jazeera. The Egyptian Al Jazeera station was located in Cairo, right on Tahrir Square, where one of the protests took place. As the government security forces clashed with the protesters, the Al Jazeera station was set on fire. The windows were smashed, and two firebombs were thrown inside because the protesters accused the station of bias in support of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁷⁷

After the coup d'état in July 2013, when president Morsi was ousted, the position of Al Jazeera in Egypt was under threat. In September, Al Jazeera accused the Egyptian authorities of jamming its satellite signals, to avoid the public from watching the programming of the network.¹⁷⁸ Independent experts hired by Al Jazeera, identified two military installations as the source of the interference. Al Jazeera claimed that, as a result, the network had to change frequencies several times to allow viewers to watch the channel.¹⁷⁹

The difficult position of Al Jazeera in Egypt was closely related to tensions between Egypt and Qatar. In particular, because Qatar had openly supported the ousted President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian government, as a result, considered Al Jazeera the mouthpiece of Qatar policy and, therefore, considered to be in support of the

¹⁷⁶ "Al-Jazeera Cairo studio set ablaze," Saudi Gazette, accessed June 16, 2020, <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/22875/Al-Jazeera-Cairo-studio-set-ablaze>.

¹⁷⁷ "Al-Jazeera Cairo studio set ablaze."

¹⁷⁸ "Al-Jazeera: Egyptians jamming signals," Saudi Gazette, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/58481/Al-Jazeera-Egyptians-jamming-signals->.

¹⁷⁹ "Al-Jazeera: Egyptians jamming signals."

Islamist backers of the former president.¹⁸⁰ This clash did not remain limited to Egypt and Qatar. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar. Reasons for this decision were the Qatari support of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the fact that Qatar had acted ‘as a cheerleader’ for the protests of the Arab Spring through Al Jazeera.¹⁸¹ Because, however, according to the Gulf states, the diplomatic crisis had caused great instability in the region, the Gulf Cooperation Council announced, eight months later during an emergency meeting, that the countries would return their ambassadors to Doha.¹⁸² In exchange, Al Jazeera announced that it would suspend its Egyptian channel until it had obtained ‘the necessary permits’. Observers have argued that this was important for upkeeping stability in the region, since Qatar had remained under much pressure from the GCC countries to stop ‘the biased coverage of Egypt by the Al Jazeera network’.¹⁸³

Furthermore, in this same period, Al Jazeera was also covered in the news because of the arrest of three Al Jazeera journalists in Egypt. Peter Greste, Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed were arrested because they allegedly had held broadcasting equipment without authorization, had broadcasted lies about Egypt on Al Jazeera and that they were default members of the Muslim Brotherhood because of working for Al Jazeera.¹⁸⁴ At the one year anniversary of their arrest, the international community urged the Egyptian authorities to free the journalists. While afterwards it had become clear that the journalists would not be free of charge for many years to come, the hope for their release was boosted at the time by the improved relations between Egypt and Qatar. In particular, because of the closure of Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr and because Qatar had expelled several Muslim Brotherhood leaders the country it was hosting.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ “Al-Jazeera suspends Egyptian channel Mubasher Misr.”

¹⁸¹ Ian Black, “Arab states withdraw ambassadors from Qatar in protest at 'interference',” *The Guardian*, March 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/05/arab-states-qatar-withdraw-ambassadors-protest>.

¹⁸² “Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain end rift with Qatar, return ambassadors,” Reuters News, accessed June 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-summit-ambassadors/saudi-arabia-uae-and-bahrain-end-rift-with-qatar-return-ambassadors-idUSKCN0J00Y420141116>.

¹⁸³ “Al-Jazeera suspends Egyptian channel Mubasher Misr.”

¹⁸⁴ “Egypt frees Al Jazeera staff jailed for journalism.”

¹⁸⁵ “Egypt urged to free al-Jazeera staff on arrest anniversary,” BBC News, accessed June 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30623108>.

9.2 The 2017 Gulf Crisis

Three years later, however, Qatar would be involved in what observers have called the worst diplomatic dispute in decades. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt cut off all land, sea and air links with Qatar.¹⁸⁶ The dispute was directly caused by a speech given by the Emir of Qatar, in which he criticized the United States, offered support for Iran and confirmed his support for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, Qatar's government also announced that it would be withdrawing its ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁸⁷ The heart of the crisis, however, consists of the unresolved points of conflict from the 2014 crisis. This becomes clear from the list of thirteen demands published by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt in June 2017. The list consisted of thirteen conditions that Qatar had to fulfill within 10 days, in order to end the economic and diplomatic blockade.¹⁸⁸ The third point on the list required the immediate closure of Al Jazeera.¹⁸⁹ The fact that that point was so high on the list, emphasizes the importance attached by the Gulf countries to the closure of Al Jazeera. Furthermore, since Al Jazeera has already been a point of frustration for many years, the closure of the station had become one of the most important conditions for the Gulf states to even start negotiations.¹⁹⁰ In particular, because Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain had already blocked Al Jazeera's website before the start of the crisis.¹⁹¹

Another indication that the 2017 crisis was caused by unresolved issues of the 2014 crisis was the publication of the secret Riyadh agreements by the CNN, which were leaked by an unconfirmed source from the region. The leaked documents consist of two secret agreements between Qatar and the Gulf countries in 2013 and 2014.¹⁹² The Gulf countries claimed that Qatar had not complied with the agreements, which explains the cause of the second diplomatic crisis in 2017. In the documents, Qatar agreed to avoid any interference in the domestic affairs of the Gulf countries. Furthermore, the prohibition of support for the Muslim Brotherhood by Qatar and the prevention of the use of Al Jazeera as platform for

¹⁸⁶ Fernandez, "The Qatar-Gulf crisis," 159.

¹⁸⁷ David Roberts, "Qatar row: What's caused the fall-out between Gulf neighbours?," *BBC News*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40159080>.

¹⁸⁸ "What are the 13 demands given to Qatar?"

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Kevin Ponniah, "Qatar crisis: Can Al Jazeera survive?," *BBC News*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40187414>.

¹⁹¹ Ponniah, "Qatar crisis: Can Al Jazeera survive?"

¹⁹² Jim Sciutto and Jeremy Herb, "Exclusive: The secret documents that help explain the Qatar crisis," *CNN*, July 11, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/10/politics/secret-documents-qatar-crisis-gulf-saudi/index.html>.

groups challenging the Egyptian government, were specifically mentioned in the agreements.¹⁹³

This helps to explain that Al Jazeera is part of the central focus of the Gulf countries in the 2017 crisis. They consider Al Jazeera a ‘key pillar of Qatar’s foreign policy and soft-power influence among a wider Arab/Muslim audience’.¹⁹⁴ In particular, because according to the Gulf states, Qatar used Al Jazeera to spread a positive view towards Islamist movements, often with negative consequences for the Arab regimes.¹⁹⁵ In a ‘fact sheet’ about ‘Qatar’s History of Funding Terrorism and Extremism’, published on the Saudi Arabian government website, is stated that Qatar has long shown negligence in combatting terrorism within its borders and for years has publicly been known to have supported, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁹⁶ In the same ‘fact sheet’, a link is made between Qatar’s alleged support for terrorist groups and Al Jazeera, because it is claimed that Qatar uses Al Jazeera to promote the Muslim Brotherhood’s agenda.¹⁹⁷

The functioning of Al Jazeera as a political actor as suggested by the Al Jazeera effect does not seem justified during the Gulf crises. While during the Arab Spring, measures were aimed directly at Al Jazeera, during the Gulf crises, they were aimed at Qatar. The Gulf crises, however, do confirm the threat posed by Al Jazeera to the Gulf regimes. This is reflected in the fact that Al Jazeera is one of the main subjects of both the diplomatic crises. The Gulf regimes seemed to consider as such a threat to their power, that it caused an escalation of the diplomatic relations with Qatar.

Chapter 10: Analysis

The existing body of academic research about Al Jazeera is largely focused on either Al Jazeera’s functioning as media network, as independent political actor or as an instrument of the Qatari government. This thesis sets out to take a different approach by focusing on Al Jazeera as subject of Qatar’s diplomatic relations.

¹⁹³ Sciutto and Herb, “Exclusive: The secret documents that help explain the Qatar crisis.”

¹⁹⁴ Joseph M. Fernandez, “The Qatar-Gulf crisis: The attack on media freedom and the West’s loss of moral authority,” *Pacific Journalism Review* 24, no. 2 (2018): 160.

¹⁹⁵ Fernandez, “The Qatar-Gulf crisis,” 160.

¹⁹⁶ “Fact Sheets: Qatar’s History of Funding Terrorism and Extremism,” The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/fact-sheets/qatar%E2%80%99s-history-funding-terrorism-and-extremism>.

¹⁹⁷ “Fact Sheets: Qatar’s History of Funding Terrorism and Extremism.”

The existing academic debate does reflect an important aspect of why the Gulf countries specifically demanded the closure of Al Jazeera in the 2014 and 2017 Gulf Crises.¹⁹⁸ According to scholars, Al Jazeera is considered a threat by the Gulf regimes because of its controversial approach to news reporting in which it exposes sensitive and problematic issues in a way that is not custom to the Arab World. Furthermore, they argue that the Gulf states consider Al Jazeera to have broadcasted lies about their regimes and that Qatar uses Al Jazeera to promote the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization which they affiliate with terrorism.¹⁹⁹

It must also be mentioned that Al Jazeera is extensively linked to Qatar, on the network itself²⁰⁰, but also in the international media. In an average news article of the BBC or the CNN, Al Jazeera is introduced as the ‘Qatari-owned al-Jazeera network’.²⁰¹ This already gives the network a backlog, due to the years long rivalry between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but also due to the other diplomatic disputes Qatar has had in the region over the years.²⁰² The constant reminder of that Al Jazeera is a Qatari network, must have influenced the reputation of Al Jazeera in the Gulf region. Even though, it does not directly explain why Al Jazeera has become a subject central in the Gulf crises, it is an aspect that must be taken into consideration while looking at why Al Jazeera has been so highly disputed in the region.

This, however, does not answer the question of why Al Jazeera, and not any other global news network that reports news about the Gulf region, has become the subject of a diplomatic crises. To do so, requires looking into what distinguishes Al Jazeera from the other global media networks, such as the CNN, the BBC or France 24. The first thing that comes to mind is the often-discussed alleged ideology of Al Jazeera. In particular, the combination of promoting Islamism, Pan-Arabism and democracy, which Al Jazeera has been open over through the years²⁰³, but has strongly denied during the 2017 Gulf crisis.²⁰⁴ A BBC representative, while comparing the BBC to Al Jazeera, has once even literally stated that what distinguishes Al Jazeera from the BBC is the fact that the BBC was a platform for debate, while Al Jazeera had a ‘self-stated explicit political purpose’.²⁰⁵ The difference is,

¹⁹⁸ “What are the 13 demands given to Qatar?”

¹⁹⁹ “Fact Sheets: Qatar’s History of Funding Terrorism and Extremism.”

²⁰⁰ Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 11.

²⁰¹ “Al-Jazeera suspends Egyptian channel Mubasher Misr,” BBC News, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30585551>.

²⁰² Zayani, *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon*, 56.

²⁰³ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 65.

²⁰⁴ Ponniah, “Qatar crisis: Can Al Jazeera survive?”

²⁰⁵ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 65.

however, that when an English speaking Western viewer does not agree with the tone of the coverage from one of the networks, he has plenty of alternatives to choose from, while an Arab in the Gulf region does not have this option.

What does distinguish Al Jazeera from other major global media networks, is its popularity in both the English- and Arabic speaking world. This has been allowed for by the different channels of the network, Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Jazeera English, which according to research, both have a discreetly different editorial policy.²⁰⁶ Furthermore, the channels have a different function and target audience and, therefore, also have different effects on the public. Therefore, this thesis suggests adding a different dimension to the existing theory, which requires distinguishing between the different channels of the network, while looking more specifically into the target audience. Both the CNN-effect and the Al Jazeera effect are applicable to research into the functioning and effects of Al Jazeera as a network. The CNN-effect, in the context of non-democratic regimes, allows for research into the loss of policy control caused by Al Jazeera as a network, which seemed to pose a threat to the ruling regimes of the Gulf region. The Al Jazeera Effect allows for research into the possible functioning of Al Jazeera as a political actor, although the application of the theory to the Gulf crises shows that this claim is not entirely justified. An extension of these theories is necessary, because neither distinguish between the two channels of the network, while Al Jazeera Arabic, as a distinct channel of the network, has a different effect globally than Al Jazeera English.

What distinguishes Al Jazeera from other global news networks is that Al Jazeera is successful on a global level as well as a regional level through its two most successful channels. Particularly relevant is the fact that the network broadcasts in Arabic on the regional level and in English on a global level. In the current academic debate, when taken into account the two different channels, it has very often led to the comparison of the Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Jazeera English.²⁰⁷ This thesis argues that the two levels cannot simply be separated from each other into two different subjects of research, because worldwide Al Jazeera is generally considered as one network. For example, because of its sympathetic coverage of the Arab Spring, not only Al Jazeera English gained popularity in the West, but

²⁰⁶ Marwan M. Krady, "Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English: A comparative institutional analysis," in *Kuala Lumpur Calling: Al-Jazeera English in Asia*, ed. M. Kugelman (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2008), 26.

²⁰⁷ Krady, "Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English.," Kessler, "The Two Faces of Al Jazeera."

Al Jazeera as a network did.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, during the 2017 Gulf crisis, the Gulf countries did not only demand the closure of Al Jazeera Arabic, but of the entire Al Jazeera network.²⁰⁹

This, however, has provided Al Jazeera with a unique position in comparison to other major global news networks, which are not active in both the English speaking and the Arabic speaking world. In particular, because the global success of Al Jazeera English has provided Al Jazeera as a network with a certain level of credibility in the Arab world, where censorship is the dominant approach to media. While both the United Kingdom and the United States have attempted to establish Arabic news channels, such as BBC Arabic and Al Hurra, they have not managed to become similarly successful.²¹⁰ Therefore, the BCC and the CNN have never posed a similar threat to the ruling Arab regimes as Al Jazeera. There are two relevant explanations for this. Firstly, during the period of research, there is no media channel comparable to Al Jazeera active in the region. Thus, providing Al Jazeera with a monopoly in news in its category and providing the network with a high level of popularity, since it was the only channel that provided ‘real news’.²¹¹ Secondly, the population of the Gulf region has a very low English proficiency, which highly limits their possibility of turning towards alternative news sources.²¹²

With this argumentation, this thesis will contribute to the theory of multilevel interactions as proposed by Gilboa, Robinson, Gabrielsen Jumbert and Miklian.²¹³ It proposes an alternative option which includes major global media networks, that do not only have an English-speaking target public. Therefore, it adds the possibility of a lack of different news sources among the target public. In the case of Al Jazeera, this means that different levels of media are fulfilled by one media network. According to the existing theory of multilevel interactions, Pakistanis in living in Norway may have Norwegian, Pakistani, European and global news sources to their availability. This thesis, however, argues that nationals from any of the Gulf countries, who do not speak English, consider Al Jazeera as their only available

²⁰⁸ Kessler, “The Two Faces of Al Jazeera,” 48.

²⁰⁹ “What are the 13 demands given to Qatar?”

²¹⁰ Seib, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, 29.

²¹¹ Erik Ipsen, “Demise of BBC Arabic TV: Nothing Lost in Translation,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/06/news/demise-of-bbc-arabic-tv-nothing-lost-in-translation.html>. ; ‘Freedom in the World,’ Freedom House, accessed June 19, 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf.

²¹² “EF English Proficiency Index 2017,” Education First, accessed June 19, 2020,

https://www.ef.com/~/_/media/centralefcom/epi/downloads/full-reports/v7/ef-epi-2017-english.pdf.

²¹³ Gilboa, Gabrielsen Jumbert, Mikian and Robinson, “Moving media and conflict studies beyond the CNN effect,” 660.

trustworthy news source,²¹⁴ they lack an independent local news source, which role is fulfilled by Al Jazeera, as a regional source. Furthermore, even if a citizen from the Gulf region would speak a (limited) level of English, there is a good chance that Al Jazeera would still be their global media network of choice, based on the high level of popularity Al Jazeera enjoys in the Gulf region and the trust that the Gulf population has proven to have in the network.²¹⁵

During the period of research, Al Jazeera was the only network that had a channel that provided quality news through an Arab lens, which was, therefore, specifically focused on the Arab public. Therefore, further research into media-state relations requires deeper research into the target audience(s) of the specific media network. In particular, because this also seemed to have contributed to why Al Jazeera was considered such a threat by the Gulf countries in the period following the Arab Spring up to the 2017 Gulf crisis.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

Since it was founded in 1996, Al Jazeera has been the subject of controversies and diplomatic conflicts involving the Qatari state, which have come to a height during the 2014 and 2017 Gulf crises. This thesis has set out to find out why Al Jazeera continued to be central in these crises of the Qatari state. In particular, because while it is funded by the Qatari state, Al Jazeera is an independent news network, similar to other global news networks like the BBC and CNN. It has done so by means of the following research question, ‘How has the regional critique on Al Jazeera impacted the diplomatic relations of Qatar?’

Among the obvious reasons why Al Jazeera was considered a threat by the Gulf states, are that Al Jazeera broadcasted controversial news and that Al Jazeera remained closely associated with the Qatari state. These reasons, however, do not yet answer the research question central in this thesis. Answering this question required looking at Al Jazeera as one network, consisting of different channels, each with its own target audience. Both Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Jazeera English are successful channels among their own specific target audience. This is a phenomenon unique to Al Jazeera, in comparison to other global media networks, such as the BBC and CNN.

The fact that Al Jazeera was the only successful free Arabic medium in the Gulf region, combined with the low level of English proficiency in the Gulf states has put Al Jazeera in a unique, powerful position. Through this argumentation, this thesis adds to the

²¹⁴ Seib, *New Media and the New Middle East*, 57.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

theory of multilevel interaction of media, by proposing the addition of the possibility of one media network functioning on multiple media levels. In the case of Al Jazeera, these were the regional and global level. Through this combination, Al Jazeera had gained a unique position because among the population of the Gulf region, it considered the only available trustworthy Arabic news channel. This powerful position has made the network vulnerable for becoming the subject of controversies and the diplomatic crises of Qatar.

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