Regional media and its role in Tahrir's revolution: Comparison between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya

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One of the hallmarks of the Egyptian revolution was the extensive presence of different media outlets to the extent that their coverage directly affected the course of events, if not shaped them. Being a central state in the Arab world, Egypt naturally received a great attention through out the world during the revolution. The coverage of the 25 January revolution was by far more focused and extensive than that of the Tunisian revolution. Unlike the Tunisian revolution which developed gradually, the Egyptian revolution emerged since its initial stages with thousands of people marching to Tahrir Square, which is a stage that was that was only reached in the final days of the Tunisian revolution. The strong character of the Egyptian revolution and its anticipated effect on the rest of the Arab world placed Egypt in the headlines on a regional and international scale throughout the revolution period. This paper will highlight the role of al-Jazeera Arabic, the Qatar-based news channel that people around the Arab world credited for supporting the revolution. This paper will also analyze the coverage of the Saudi-owned al-Arabiya, and compare it to that of al-Jazeera. This comparison will serve as a lens to read the political stance and underlying ideologies of different Arab countries towards the revolutions in the region, specifically Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Al-Jazeera:

Out of the small peninsula of Qatar, al-Jazeera first broadcasted on 1 November 1996; it was soon apparent that this channel was to revolutionize the Arab media. Al-Jazeera was the first to
publicly challenge Arab governments by presenting voices of dissent. The channel portrayed a new model based on presenting “the view and the opposite point of view,”¹ a trend that was later followed by other news channels such as al-Arabiya.² According to some observers, even before the eruption of the revolutions now sweeping the region, al-Jazeera was already playing a role in social and political change.³ For example, Hussein Ibish and Ali Abunimah explain that “Al Jazeera presents the best trends of openness and democratization in the Arab world. It is a long-overdue two-way street in the global flow of information and opinion. It should be celebrated and encouraged.”⁴

Faisal Al Kasim, the host of one of al-Jazeera’s most watched talk shows⁵ The Opposite Direction (Al Ittijah Al Muaakis), stated in an article that he wrote in 2005 that Arab regimes feared al-Jazeera because it was an “eye-opener” for the masses.

Arab regimes could be right in their belief that successful private Arab TV channels have widened the gap between the governments and the people. Indeed, debate programs on certain Arab satellite television channels have been eye-openers. The people have come to know more about what is happening in their societies. For the first time, they can hear the view of the opposition loud and clear. And the more people get to know the other opinions in their countries, the more they become at odds with their governments. Some are afraid that the new media might lead one day to alienation, or to a divorce between the regimes and their subjects.⁶

From Al Kasim’s point of view, Al-Jazeera was indeed playing a role in political mobilization through exposing the public to the different views of opposition, ones that their governments did not want them to hear. And as Al Kasim predicted, the day of alienation and the “divorce between the regimes and their subjects” did arrive. After the success of the Tunisian revolution,

¹ “The view and the opposite point of view” is al-Jazeera’s logo
² Interview with Hafez Al Mirazy. 19 May 2011
⁴ Ibid, 33
⁶ Ibid, 102
the coverage of al-Jazeera was beginning to show a stronger stance against the regimes through mobilizing the Arab streets. The channel that the regimes viewed as troublemaking was now reaping what he had been sowing for more than a decade.

25 January Revolution Coverage:

On 25 January, the demonstrations in Egypt was not the major story on al-Jazeera’s evening news broadcast, the focus of course changed dramatically later on. The broadcasted report of the protests on 25 January constituted of images from the street as “thousands,” the reporter explained, were marching towards Tahrir Square in what he described as “the biggest demonstration since decades.” The report went on to challenge the claims of the Egyptian government that no protestors were arrested. “Officially, no statement was made about arresting any of the demonstrators, but the camera of al-Jazeera recorded the detention of tens of protestors” said the reporter. With its obvious inclination to the demonstrators from the first stages of the revolution, al-Jazeera was a party to the conflict and not just a sympathetic news network.

On the other hand, in comparison to al-Jazeera, the Saudi owned Al-Arabiya was much more conservative in its coverage of the Egyptian revolution and the Arab uprisings in general, with the exception of Libya. In the early days of the Tahrir protests, al-Arabiya seemed less proactive in covering the events. For example, it did not even address the demonstrations on the 25th of January as a major headline. What the channel addressed instead was “the capture of nineteen

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7 “Demonstrations of ‘The Day of Rage’ in Egypt” Al-Jazeera reports section, 25 January 2011
8 Ibid
terrorists by the Egyptian authorities.”10 The televised report explained that those terrorists were planning for suicide bombings before the bombing of the Church of the Two Saints in Alexandria which occurred on the 1st of January. On its website, on the 25th of January, al-Arabiya pointed to the “possibility” of demonstrations and quoted Habib El-Adly, Egypt’s interior minister, a widely hated figure of the ruling regime. The channel then reported El-Adly’s warning to the demonstrators of his intentions to arrest any of those willing to demonstrate “illegally” and cause “chaos and destruction.”11 Both the televised report and the news article posted on the website did not interview any of the protestors or address their demands in any way. Unlike the Al-Jazeera reports, Al-Arabiya initially did not include images of the demonstrators nor clarify the reasons for their demonstration.

On 26 January, al-Arabiya continued to turn a blind eye to the demonstrations by not posting any news articles about the updates of the Egyptian scene. However, on the 27th, the channel had to finally recognize the elephant in the room. On that day, al-Arabiya website posted an article attempting to explain the demonstrations on 25 January. The article’s title stated: “Demonstrations of ‘Angry Tuesday’ Against Poverty and Corruption Show Distortions of the Economy.”12 The article attempted to explain the demonstrations in the light of economic problems. The channel thus proposed that the reasons behind the uprising in Egypt were purely economic and had nothing to do with the political system itself. In this way, the channel distinguished potential discontent in the Gulf States, and particularly Saudi Arabia from the rising tide of popular mobilization in Egypt. By highlighting the deteriorated economic situation in Egypt as the reason behind the uprising, the channel hoped to delink the citizens of the Gulf

10 Ibid
from their common cause with the Egyptian case. This way, Arabs in rich countries can stop relating with the Egyptian and Tunisian case, as the common political motivations of most Arab people against authoritarianism are masked.

The trend of focusing on the economic aspects continued later on as the demonstrations escalated. For example, on 29 January, al-Arabiya’s top story about Egypt stated in its title: “After Losing Twelve Billion Dollars in Two Session: Egypt Decides to Shut Down Its Market.” The article went on to explain the negative economic consequences of the continuous demonstrations and their effect on the stability of Egypt. In doing so, Al-Arabiya helped promote the argument of the ruling party, which was that the demonstrations were destroying the economy and affecting Egypt’s stability.

Al-Jazeera Escalates:

On 28 January, in what was known as the Friday of Rage (Jum’at al gadab,) the Egyptian police closed the office of al-Jazeera and attacked some of its journalists. The attacks continued on 30 January when the Egyptian authorities arrested six of the channel’s journalists. With these incidents, the tone of the news channel escalated and became more aggressive, attacking the collapsing regime and plainly stating that the regime is “aiming to silence the voice of the Egyptian people.” The channel then asserted its determination and insistence on continuing its

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15 “Egypt Shuts Down Al-Jazeera’s Office and Suspends Its Broadcast.” Al-Jazeera Arabic Website, 30 January 2011
“broad and intensified”\textsuperscript{16} coverage of the events in Egypt. A spokesman of the channel said: “if anything, our resolve to get the story has increased.” \textsuperscript{17}

With these actions and reactions, one notices the shifting tone of al-Jazeera, from a channel whose declared message is delivering the “view and the other point of view,” to a highly active and aggressive, media platform for the revolution. The role of al-Jazeera became more of a mobilizer of the masses than just a news channel sympathetic to the Egyptian street. This shift in objectivity, although serving the cause of the demonstrators, came under attack by many journalists. For example, journalist Ghassan Ben Jeddo, director of al-Jazeera’s office in Beirut and host of its program Open Dialogue (\textit{hiwar maftouh},) resigned lately from the channel. The Lebanese newspaper As-Safir quoted sources saying that Ben Jeddo resigned since “al-Jazeera abandoned an ideal of objectivity and professionalism and resorted to gutter journalism, which has turned Al Jazeera from a media source to the operations room for incitement and mobilization.”\textsuperscript{18} The newspaper also claimed that Ben Jeddo’s resignation was morally motivated since al-Jazeera covered the events in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and not Bahrain. Ben Jeddo’s resignation highlights the different approaches that al-Jazeera has towards the movements in different countries. The protests in Bahrain are not favored by the Qatari regimes since they are too close to home. This shows the level of influence that Qatari government has over the coverage of the channel. Hafez Al Mirazy, former director of al-Jazeera office in Washington, criticized the channel’s coverage of the Egyptian revolution and considered it unprofessional.

Al-Jazeera really felt as if it was leading the masses and that it was playing a role. People working for the channel do not deny that, this is what they want to do. They want to be

\textsuperscript{16}“Egypt Shuts Down Al-Jazeera’s Office and Suspends Its Broadcast.” Al-Jazeera Arabic Website, 30 January 2011
\textsuperscript{18}“Al-Jazeera Beirut Bureau Chief Resigns”, PressTV, April 23 2011
revolutionaries and change the regimes in the Middle East. But this is something that has nothing to do with journalism. This is political mobilization.\textsuperscript{19}

In addition to the challenging tone in its news and broadcasted reports, al-Jazeera stopped all its running programs during the three weeks of the revolution, creating a continuous all-day coverage of the updates in Egypt. With the demonstrations in Egypt being the only story, the channel continuously aired different promos to advocate for the Egyptian revolution. While playing popular Egyptian songs such as Om Kolthom’s \textit{Ana alsha’b} (I the people,) the themes of these promos had slogans such as “Egypt speaks for itself,” and “Egypt: The Revolution of the People.”\textsuperscript{20} Al-Arabiya also tried to imitate al-Jazeera and created a promo of its own about the Egyptian revolutions, but the slogan there was “Clashes of Egypt”\textsuperscript{21} \textit{muwajahat misr}, indicating a non-aligned position with the demonstrators.

If we analyze the trends of coverage that Al-Jazeera adopted since the outbreak of the protests on 25 January, one can notice that the channel conducted little if any interviews with members of the ruling party. Such as a strategy implied to the viewer that the channel did not see the Egyptian government as legitimate and was only concerned with the points of view of the people. This was in stark contradiction to al-Arabiya which conducted phone interviews with members of the ruling party and based much of its updates on their statements.

Another difference between the coverage of al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya according to Mirazy, stems from the different ideological stance of the two networks. Al-Jazeera he argues, is pro-Islamist, whereas, al-Arabiya is not sympathetic to the Islamists, and at times even anti-Islamist. When it came to their coverage of the 25 January revolution, this ideological difference was manifested.

\textsuperscript{19} Interview with Hafez Al-Mirazy, May 19 2011
\textsuperscript{20} http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKqelpN1778&feature=grec_index
In al-Jazeera’s coverage of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, it appeared as if the Muslim Brotherhood were the main actors in the revolution. This could have a counter effect because it could lead people to be scared of political Islamists, and think that they are going to take over the country. On the other hand, al-Arabiyah did not leave any chance to report negative news about political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood.22

As Mirazy observed, al-Arabiya’s anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance was obvious in some of its early reports about the revolution. In its news broadcast on 28 January, al-Arabiya first reported that the Egyptian Ministry of Interior captured twenty of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders.23 The report went on to describe the chaos in the Egyptian streets, implying that the Brotherhood was responsible for the demonstrations. However, there is no evidence that al-Jazeera portrayed the Muslim Brotherhood as the driving force behind the revolution. As a matter of fact, many of al-Jazeera’s reports emphasized that the demonstrators did not have a single leader or a single ideology. For example, al-Jazeera’s broadcasted report on 30 January stated: “the demonstrators whom are not bonded by one political party or one religious doctrine, but anger over the economical, social and political situation...these demonstrators feel that the dream of change is now near.”24

The strong inclination of al-Jazeera to the protestors intensified as many Egyptians came to view the channel as their ally. Some demonstrators called the channel and praised its stance of supporting the Egyptians deliver their voice. Al-Jazeera for its part did not fail to remind the viewers of its role; from time to time, al-Jazeera would broadcast images of demonstrators carrying flags with the channel’s logo.25 The Egyptian ruling party on the other hand, continued its claims that the channel was a “troublemaking” mobilizer of the people aimed at targeting

22 Interview with Hafez Al-Mirazy, May 19 2011
24 “Protestors Pledge to Continue Protesting Until Their Demands are Met”, al-Jazeera Reports Section, 30 January 2011
25 “Al-Jazeera Coverage of The Moment Mubarak Resigned” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rbC1QaG_Kw
Egypt’s stability. In an interview with the Egyptian Channel One on 3 February, Omar Soliman, Head of Intelligence and later Vice President for a short period, declared in an implicit address to Qatar: “I blame some friendly countries for their very unfriendly channels that have charged our youth against the state with lies and exaggerations.” Clearly, Soliman saw an active role for the Qatari government in what he called the “lies and exaggerations” of the channel. But even if we disregard Soliman’s accusations and see them as a natural response of a collapsing regime, one can still question the degree of independence that the channel claims to have. To what extent does Qatar as a state and a government influence the very influential news network?

Editorial Independence:

Initially, the Qatari government financed the channel, providing it with a five-year $150 million loan that was due for repayment in five years. Although almost fifteen years have passed since the debut of the channel, it is still not financially independent. Al-Jazeera received financial assistance from the government to cover costs of capital investments, specifically funding new projects such as the al-Jazeera English channel. Al-Jazeera is therefore dependent on the Qatari government for its survival.

In addition to being financially dependent on the government of Qatar, al-Jazeera has always been suspiciously silent on its host country, sparing it coverage and criticism, which shows a degree of censorship practiced by the channel. Recently, Wikileaks cables recently revealed that the US State Department thinks that al-Jazeera has been changing its coverage to suit Qatar’s

26 Omar Solman’s Interview with Egypt’s First Channel, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRTjauZ0Lko&feature=related, 4 February 2011


28 Ibid, 16
foreign policy. The released cables claimed that Qatar is using al-Jazeera as a bargaining chip in its foreign policy negotiations, offering to cease critical transmissions in exchange for concessions. For example, in 2009, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar improved after Qatar toned down criticism of the Saudi royal family on al-Jazeera. According to Al Mirazy, the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is a perfect example for the lack of editorial independence that the channel claims to have.

A good example for lack of editorial independence is the reconciliation and rapprochement that took place between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2009. Ever since, al-Jazeera stopped covering news items that would bother the Saudi government, and it is still the case until today. Also, the coverage of both channels (al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera) on Bahrain reveals lack of editorial independence. We can understand this from al-Arabiya, but it is puzzling for a channel that is championing all the revolutions in the Middle East. Both channels are not just affected by their governments foreign policy, they are being dictated.

Although unlikely, whether both channels are literally “dictated” is a question that only high level employees in the channels can answer. But nevertheless, the coverage of these news networks is highly linked to the stances of their governments.

But on the other hand, even though al-Jazeera is highly influenced by Qatar’s foreign policy, the channel maintains a degree of editorial independence. This independence is the essence of its influence. The level of freedom that the channel enjoys is what enabled it to enter the homes of millions of Arabs and gain their trust. Despite the fact that the channel has complicated the diplomatic task of Qatar in the short run, al-Jazeera serves the diplomatic interests of the Emirate in the long run. For now, al-Jazeera’s main objective is to gain credibility and respect among the rising Arab street and its future leaders. This will serve Qatar in terms of maintaining its

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29 Robert Booth, “WikiLeaks cables claim al-Jazeera changed coverage to suit Qatari foreign policy,” The Guardian, 6 December 2010
30 Ibid
31 Ibid
32 Interview with Hafez Al-Mirazy, May 19 2011
influential position in the Arab scene, something that the Emirate has been invested in since the rise of its new Emir in 1995.

As for Al-Arabiya, the conservative anti-revolution policies of Saudi Arabia have prevented the channel from painting the image of a free press. In between its attempt to cover the escalating revolutions in the Arab world and the Saudi policies of containing the spread of these revolutions, al-Arabiya’s coverage fell short of objectivity.