

AL JAZEERA AND QATARI FOREIGN POLICY: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Our paper explores the Al-Jazeera network and its relationship to the state which set it up and continues to fund it. We suggest that, while the network may provide perspectives for Western viewers that other large, but Western-owned networks do not, it is far from immune from the problems of state influence. Behind a cultivated veneer of providing perspectives from 'the Arab street', the network reflects foreign policy perspectives of the Qatari state and the small elite which controls it. This paper surveys Al-Jazeera Arabic news coverage (August 2014-August 2015) of conflict in Iraq and three AJA current affairs programmes coverage (January 2014-August 2015) of conflict in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. The results indicate that, on foreign policy issues which the Qatari elite regards as particularly important, the network promotes the perspectives of the state. The relationship between the Qatari state and Al-Jazeera also constrains the network's independence and objectivity.

Keywords: Al-Jazeera, Qatari foreign policy, Iraq, Syria, Egypt

INTRODUCTION

The huge growth of mass communications, including television, in recent decades has raised a series of important issues such as how the connections between media outlets and their owners and media outlets and the state impact on politics. These issues are hardly new – for instance, back in the period when newspapers were the main form of media the same issues existed. What is new is the sheer scale of media today and the way in which media, most particularly television, based in one country can affect politics and perceptions in other countries. One of the newest media networks about which these questions are asked is Al-Jazeera. This paper examines the news on AJA over a twelve-month period and three current affairs programmes over a twenty-month period to test out the connections between the type of coverage

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AJA provides of Syria, Iraq and Egypt and Qatari foreign policy interests and prerogatives in relation to these three countries.

Academic and journalistic examinations of the impact of television, most particularly in imparting or challenging dominant views of the world on issues such as foreign policy, appear to have taken several decades to emerge, one of the first being Larson (1988). That same year saw the publication of probably the most significant work about the mass media as a mechanism for propaganda by governments and powerful business interests (Chomsky & Herman, 1988; for a major critique, see, for instance, Klaehn, 2002). Indeed the late 1980s and early 1990s, coinciding with the advent of cable television and fresh United States and allied interventions in the former Yugoslavia, the first Gulf War, Somalia, the invasion of Afghanistan and then Gulf War 2 (the invasion of Iraq), saw a mushrooming of work on the relationship between foreign policy and the mass media. An important area of analysis which opened up involved examining issues from the standpoint of the ability of mass media to affect, and even effect, state policy in some of the conflicts mentioned above. For instance, 'The CNN effect' saw mass media as pushing the US government into 'humanitarian interventions' in Bosnia and Somalia. Such analysis, by its very nature, suggested that mass media, especially those able to communicate powerful images, functioned as autonomous or semi-autonomous actors in their own right and not simply mechanisms for dispersing the ideology of elites and thereby "manufacturing consent", as in the Herman-Chomsky model. (For an early critical analysis, see Livingstone, 1997; Robinson, 1999, provides both a useful outline of 'CNN Effect' arguments and strong counter-arguments.) A new sphere of academic research and attention on the part of political and media analysts subsequently opened up with the establishment of Al-Jazeera in 1996.

Al-Jazeera is the Arab world's first 24-hour news channel, and with a reach of over 50 million Arab houses in the Middle East by 2006. Initial work on Al-Jazeera tended to be narratives about its establishment, growth and positive impact, most particularly in opening up political debate in the Arab world. For instance, a 2001 paper asks and answers very basic questions around these points, while describing the network as already "the most famous satellite TV station in the Arab world" and "the new Arab media phenomenon" (Bahry, 2001: 88). Four years later, the awe with which a significant layer of academics and journalists regarded the network was still obvious. Miles, for instance, suggested that Al-Jazeera is a real alternative to the "abundance of media" in the Arab world whose "main interest was in serving the government, which in practice meant much buffing of the ruler's ego" (Miles, 2005, p. 23). He also argued that by breaking some taboos, such as giving air-time to Israeli speakers and Israeli points of view, the network had changed the landscape of Arab media forever (Miles, 2006). Moreover, by focusing on and producing programs about Western politics and shedding light on the corruption of the Arab rulers, AJA has "done more to inform Arabs about democracy than any nation or station" (Miles, 2006, p. 22). As late as 2011 two other writers would note, "the network is said to have provided a unique source of visual information" which put the audience in front of "more realistic pictures" about the nature of conflicts in the Middle East (Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011, p. 220).

Certainly, positive views of Al Jazeera are backed by some studies. For instance, a study by Miladi suggested that the Arab-speaking diaspora in Britain finds Al-Jazeera more reliable and trustworthy than the BBC and CNN post-9/11 (Miladi, 2006). Similarly, an empirical study by Alwan indicated that 58% of the Iraqi journalists covered by the study consistently watch Al-Jazeera. Among these, 85% believed the network to be an important source of information in normal situations and 76% of them believed it to be an important source at times of crisis (Alwan, 2011).

More critical analyses have also emerged, however. Al-Jazeera's promotion of freedom of speech and its introduction of a new scrutiny to Arab media are claims that have attracted some skepticism and more critical investigation. In particular, it seems Al-Jazeera, like other networks in the Arab world (and indeed wider afield), criticizes the actions of states abroad while ignoring issues that happen at home in Qatar. Fandy describes this widespread approach as "anywhere but here" (Fandy, 2007, p. 9). Moreover, Al-Jazeera is selective in what it covers and criticizes abroad. For instance, it allocated a large amount of coverage to Syria, and sometimes even fabricated news, and did likewise in the cases of the Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian uprisings, yet barely covered the uprising in Bahrain (Khatib, 2013, p. 428). This, Khatib believes, was due to Qatari foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): even if Qatar is not always in complete agreement with other GCC states, it does not suggest, or support, rebellions against them. It is particularly circumspect in relation to Saudi Arabia.

The relationship between Al-Jazeera and the Qatari state has also been subject to debate and critique. The fact that Al-Jazeera was founded and funded by the Emir of Qatar, with an annual budget of \$300 million, leads El-Ibiary to consider the Al-Jazeera claim to independence and the production of balanced and credible information as being inaccurate (El-Ibiary, 2011). Additionally, members of the Qatari formals and royal family hold key positions in Al-Jazeera, including the head of its board of directors who is the former deputy minister of information (Fandy, 2007, p. 47). Fandy questions both the independence of the network and the role of 'the man behind Al-Jazeera', the former foreign minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al-Thani; is he part of the state or civil society (Fandy, 2007, p. 3)? Furthermore, the fact that Al-Jazeera is operating in an authoritarian state environment, and "the state and not market forces" drives its agenda, leads Fandy to suggest that, unlike what the network itself claims, it is not really comparable to the BBC. The BBC certainly is funded by the British tax-payers but it is subject to scrutiny in terms of that funding. The broadcaster is not directly tied to the ruling elite. Moreover, the British government is elected; it is not as if Queen Elizabeth herself set up a TV network and picked people to run it.

Al-Jazeera is described by Fandy as an instrument of power for the Qatari government (Fandy, 2007, p. 40). The network, it is suggested, plays a key role in the attempt by the tiny state – it is less than 12,000 square kilometers with a population of a mere 250,000, but has the highest GDP of any country in the world – to play a significant regional and even international role. Khatib, for instance, in noting the rise

of Qatar, suggests "it has almost become expected that, whatever the conflict facing the region, the tiny emirate will find a role for itself within it" (Khatib, 2013, p. 417).

Qatar's boldness in foreign policy has involved two major stages, both of which are linked to Al-Jazeera. The first was its emergence as a mediator in regional conflicts, from Libya to Sudan to Lebanon to Afghanistan (Khatib, 2013, p. 418). This explains Qatari endeavors to get close to conflicting parties such as Hamas, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Nusra, the Syrian rebels, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and similar groups. This policy finds its reflection in Al-Jazeera coverage of these conflicts; this is particularly obvious in Al-Jazeera Arabic. Qatar, suggests Boyce, made contact with conflicting parties prepared to accept mediation (Boyce, 2013). The second stage is a more proactive one; Qatar actually takes its own initiatives. This can be seen coming into play with the case of Libya and the upsurge against Gadhafi. Here, Qatar acted on behalf of both its own interests and those of other Arab states, pushing for international intervention and using the Al Jazeera network as an instrument of its diplomacy. It also provided finance and military equipment for the Libyan rebels, even after the killing of Gadhafi (Khatib, 2013, pp. 420-422).

The Syrian and Egyptian cases are also interesting in terms of the connection between Al-Jazeera and Qatari foreign policy as the Qatari regime changed its political position in both instances and the changes were followed by changes in Al-Jazeera's coverage of both rebellions (Khatib, 2013, p. 422). This connection between Al-Jazeera coverage and Qatari foreign policy reflects, it has been suggested, the Qatari elite's feelings of vulnerability within the Persian Gulf area. Unlike Kuwait, whose negligible role made it an easy target for the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, Qatar seeks security, particularly in face of its two large neighbors – Iran and Saudi Arabia – by making itself as visible as possible (Boyce, 2013); the network is a crucial means for achieving this. Another factor is that Al-Jazeera was launched as a means for balancing against the Saudi domination of the Arab media and to keep Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt "on the defensive" (Fandy 2007: 46). An American foreign policy analyst also suggests the network has raised the profile of Qatar and that, "although functionally independent, could be said to indirectly serve the foreign policy goals of Qatar" (Sharp, 2003, p. 4).

It is the linkage between Al-Jazeera news and current affairs presentation of key regional conflicts and the foreign policy of Qatar – or, more precisely, of the Qatari elite – that the present paper explores through analysis of programme content. This type of programme content analysis is very much an undeveloped area in relation to Al-Jazeera, a notable exception being Kolmer and Semetko (2009), who include the network in a study of media responses in five other countries to the Iraq War¹. However, their focus is comparing Al-Jazeera coverage to that of other networks in relation to that war, not in comparing Al-Jazeera programme content to Qatari foreign policy.

¹ They also helpfully include a substantial list of scholarly works on the role of the news media in times of war (Kolmer & Semetko 2009: 644).

Al-Jazeera and the coverage of Syria, Egypt and Iraq

This case study consists of two major parts. In the first part, three current affairs talk-show programs from AJA – al etijah al mu'akes (the Opposite Opinion), hadith al thuwra (the Discourse of the Revolution) and bila hudud (Borderless) – are examined in relation to coverage of Syria, Egypt and Iraq. The second part is allocated to the news coverage of Iraq from August 2014 to August 2015.

The Opposite Opinion

This is a weekly show on AJA, presented by the famous Syrian national broadcaster Faisal al-Qassem and usually comprising of two guests who represent two different, and opposing, discourses. In the period between January 2014 and August 2015 there were 76 episodes of the Opposite Opinion. The number of episodes which were about Syria and/or Iraq was as following:

Syria	Iraq	Indirect coverage of Syria or Iraq	Coverage of both Syria and Iraq	Total
30	9	5	3	47
39.4%	11.8%	6.5%	3.9%	61.8

The majority of the coverage on the Opposite Opinion was of Syria. This may be linked to the nationality of the show's presenter and his knowledge of the country. However, he is far from being neutral when hosting programmes on Syria and Iraq. On 11 March 2014, for instance, al-Qassem hosted an episode titled, "What is the Assad election program: elect your murderer?" (Al-Jazeera, 2014a). Less than one month after the fall of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq with over two million people, to ISIS, in 11 July 2014 al-Qassem hosted an episode entitled "The outcome of Assad-Al Maleki cooperation in confronting the revolutionaries" (Al-Jazeera, 2014b). On both occasions al-Qassem, as was the case in various other episodes, intervened in favor of anti-Assad and anti-Maleki arguments, framing the two characters as "sectarian", "Shi'a" (which held negative implications) and puppets of Iran. He also suggested Maleki, Assad and Shi'a were oppressing and even purging the Sunni population of Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, the advance of ISIS, particularly in Iraq, was framed as "revolution" or a Sunni "tribal revolution" (with positive implications).

The level of inaccurate information used by both guests and al-Qassem is another component which makes the Opposite Opinion more like a propaganda programme rather than a genuine debate. For instance, in an episode entitled "the origin of terrorism. . . is it from [the Syrian] regime or from the Islamic State?" on 9 December 2014, al-Qassem claimed he had an official "report" on the crimes committed by the Syrian regime and that he was reading part of it to his pro-Syrian government guest Yazan Mish'an al-Joboury. While reading the report al-Qassem referred to the Syrian regime as an "Alawite regime". Al-Joboury asked al-Qassem about the source and the provider of the "report" but al-Qassem was not able to identify the source of the report which he, nevertheless, claimed was "completely documented". Al-Joboury insisted on knowing the provider of the "report" and claimed that "there is no report referring to the Syrian regime as an Alawite regime". Al-Qassem, while seeming upset and yet still unable to identify his source, responded, "as if those who govern Syria are the Sunnis not the Alawites" (Al-Jazeera, 2014c). It is also important to note that the opposing

guest's argument (against al-Joboury) was anti-Alawite and in support of Sunni grievances.

Not only the Opposite Opinion but all three examined shows exhibit the phenomenon of selective guests. That is a tactic by which AJA "call-out" specific guests in order to "support the favorite line of argument" (El-Ibiary, 2011, p. 200). The entire set of episodes of the Opposite Opinion on Iraq and Syria, therefore, not only produces negative views of both the Syrian and Iraqi regimes through the use of selective guests but also include provocations by the broadcaster and the use of only those statistics which support his views. For instance, in an episode on 25 May 2015 entitled "Did the Islamic State accomplish its goal of lasting and expanding?", AJA claimed that 81.6% of its audience answered "Yes" to the question "Do you support the victories of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq" while only 18.4% answered "No" (Al-Jazeera, 2015a). In this episode, Al-Qassem hosted two guests, one pro-ISIS and the other a supporter of other jihadist groups in Syria such as al-Nusra. Unsurprisingly, while there was no representative for any of the Syrian, Iraqi or Shi'a Muslims' perspectives, they were being subject to extremely harsh criticisms and allegations. The guests were also left free to glorify the violence committed by either ISIS or other jihadist groups. The message that AJA seemed to be delivering in terms of the relationship between ISIS and Shi'a Muslims or ISIS and the Iraqi-Syrian governments is that ISIS is no worse than the Shi'a and that "Shi'a crimes" must be deemed worse than violence committed by ISIS.

The Discourse of the Revolution:

This programme is run by multiple hosts from different Arab countries. In the period between January 2014 and August 2015 The Discourse of the Revolution produced a total of 258 episodes. The coverage of Syria, Egypt and Iraq during this period was as following:

Syria	Egypt	Iraq	Indirect mentions of Syria, Egypt and Iraq	Total
56	106	11	8	181
21.7%	41%	4.2%	3.1%	70.1%

The biggest focus of AJA in this programme was Egypt. Coverage of Egypt particularly centered on criticism of the government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi who became president after overthrowing the former president, Muslim Brotherhood member Muhammad Morsi. While the "revolutions" in Egypt and Syria were overwhelmingly represented it was difficult to find a single episode in the above-mentioned period that addressed the situation in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia.

In an episode on 4 January 2014 the AJA broadcaster Al-Habib Al-Gharibi interrupted his Syrian national guest for using the term Da'esh. The term is a widely-used abbreviation for ISIS in the Middle East and has a negative and sarcastic implication. Al-Gharibi asked his guest to use the term "Islamic State" given that it is what the AJA "acknowledges" (Al-Jazeera, 2014d). However, AJA does not seem to be eager to use official terms when it comes to the Iraqi forces who fight ISIS. For instance, the volunteer army, known as hashd al-shabi in Arabic, that emerged after the collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul, mostly from cities with Shi'a majorities, is

barely referred to by its official title; instead, AJA repeatedly used the terms “Shi’a militias”, “sectarian militias” or just “the militias” to refer to hashd al-sha’bi.

Borderless:

This programme is presented by an Egyptian national, Ahmed Mansour, whose political orientation is described as ‘second generation’ Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Fandy, 2007, p. 48). In the period between January 2014 and August 2015 Borderless produced 75 episodes. The share of coverage of Egypt, Syria and Iraq in this programme, in terms of numbers of episodes, was as following:

On Syria	On Egypt	On Iraq	Total
11	25	4	40
14.6%	33.3%	5.3%	53.3%

The fact that such a high percentage of episodes focused on Egypt may have something to do with the nationality and political orientation of the presenter, someone who also enjoys a high profile in AJA. This programme is similar to The Opposite Opinion programme in terms of AJA broadcasting tactics, with el-Sisi and Egypt generally under his presidency being presented in a similar way to how Bashar Al-Assad and Syria under his rule are presented on The Opposite Opinion. For instance, in an episode in 28 May 2014 Mansour begins with the following:

At the moment, two staged elections are being held in the Arab world by the most two loony and authoritarian rulers whose hands are dirty from their people's blood... Bashar Al-Assad... and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi who killed tens of thousands of Egyptians (Al-Jazeera, 2014e). (Emphasis added.)

It is difficult, however, to find a reliable source to show that Abdel Fattah el-Sisi killed - or even if there were – “tens of thousands” of Egyptian victims after the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi in 2013 by the military. Nevertheless, Mansour commonly refers to the post-Morsi situation in Egypt with terms such as “ridiculous election” and “coup [against Morsi]” when he interviews his guests. On the other hand, when Borderless interviews a pro-Muslim Brotherhood guest, as the title of the episode in 9 April 2014 indicates, the framing is not only toward undermining el-Sisi but also to propagandize for the Muslim Brotherhood. For instance, the above-mentioned episode advertises its content by saying, “Neda (the guest): ‘el-Sisi is not qualified for ruling [Egypt] and Muslim Brotherhood will not surrender’.”

The coverage of Syria by Borderless during the period examined was also disproportionately directed against Assad. The interviewed guests included a Syrian General captured by Al-Nusra who Mansour referred to as “revolutionaries” and an exclusive interview with Abu Muhammad Al-Julani, a member of Al-Qaeda and leader of Al-Nusra which is known as an Al-Qaeda affiliate (See episodes on 8 July 2015 and 27 May 2015).

The coverage of Iraq, although less than that of Egypt and Syria, was not free from sectarian framing. For instance, in episodes on 23 April 2014 and 22 January 2014, Mansour is interested in the sectarian attitude of the former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maleki and the role of sectarian attitudes in the Iraqi elections. Although AJA

presents itself as critical of sectarianism it repeatedly frames the conflicts in Syria and Iraq as Shi'a vs Sunni or, more specifically, as justified Sunni grievances vs Shi'a sectarian regimes in Syria and Iraq. As will be apparent in the next section of our findings, ISIS, particularly in Iraq, is taken as representative of the Sunni population.

Iraq in AJA News:

The "advanced searching" engine on the AJA website indicated 4354 results for the words "Iraq News" and "Iraq". However, large numbers of the results had either no reference, or an irrelevant reference, to Iraq. There was also a very small proportion of news, mainly about cultural activities or Iraqi children's talents in schools that could be construed as positive news about Iraq. As these two categories – one large and one small – are excluded from this survey, it is based on 1363 news features in the period between August 2014 and August 2015. Therefore, the data gathered is about the largest proportion of AJA news on the Iraqi government and its relation to ISIS.

Particularly Negative on the Iraqi Government	Negative Coverage of the Iraqi Military Performance and Their Losses to ISIS	Coverage of the ISIS Losses to the Iraqi Military Forces	Joint coverage - Military Clashes Between ISIS and the Iraqi Forces	Particularly Negative on ISIS	Positive Coverage of ISIS
530	506	113	108	64	42
38.9%	37%	8.3%	7.9%	4.7%	3.1%

As the results indicate, the majority – 75.9% of AJA's main coverage of the Iraqi government – presents negative views. This is divided into two categories: the first is that 38.9% of a total 1363 news mentions were particularly negative about the Iraqi government and the second is the 37% of news mentions which appear to have been framed to undermine the Iraqi military's performance or portray it as weak and hopeless in the face of ISIS. The first category of news depicted the Iraqi government as drowning in its own sectarian policies, the systematic marginalization of the Sunni population, a high level of corruption and not doing enough for – or even being responsible for the miserable situation of – the Iraqi refugees, and for being a "puppet" of Iran.

The ISIS advances against the Iraqi military forces were over-represented in the second category. Sometimes, such advances are not verifiable. For instance, AJA claimed more than once that ISIS shot down Iraqi aircraft, a claim that the Iraqi Defence Ministry officially denied. However, the same photo, released by ISIS, which was used for the news about shooting down the Iraqi aircraft have been re-presented for a news item that claimed ISIS shot down a US drone. Allegations that the Iraqi air-force bombarded civilian Sunni areas in Fallujah and Tikrit occupied a significant space in the AJA news broadcasting on Iraq. These news items were usually accompanied by claims the Iraqi or "Shi'a militia" systematically target Sunnis in the areas of conflict.

The coverage of ISIS defeats or retreats is disproportionately less than the coverage of their advances against the Iraqi forces. Nevertheless, a large proportion of this category was about the US-led coalition air-strikes against ISIS; these were sometimes accompanied by mentions of ISIS casualties. This type of coverage may not be necessarily in favor of the Iraqi forces given that some Gulf and Arab states such as

Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Jordan are among the US-led coalition. The next and smaller category of 7.9% is news that jointly covers clashes between ISIS and Iraqi forces without specifying who defeated whom.

Sixty-four out of the examined 1364 news items can be categorized as “particularly negative on ISIS”. This category makes more sense when put in the context of the amount of positive coverage of ISIS.

The relationship of AJA and Al-Qaeda-type groups is not new. Fandy considers the significant proportion of news given to Bin Laden tapes on AJA news as being part of the Qatari pressure on Saudi Arabia given that Bin Laden, after all, was an anti-Saudi figure. Moreover, on the nature of positive coverage by AJA of Al-Qaeda-type groups Fandy says:

There is no mention of any crime committed by the Taliban regime. Bin Laden’s and Al-Zawahiri’s history of terror, both in the Arab world and globally, are forgotten. Instead, Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and the Taliban are portrayed as the victims (Fandy, 2007, p. 47).

It has been noted that the negative coverage of ISIS in this category took place when the news was not about ISIS fighting either Iraqi or Syrian forces. For instance, ISIS atrocities were mentioned in cases relevant to the Izadi minority in Iraq, and ISIS against other groups fighting in Syria, particularly in Dair al-Zor, who also enjoy sympathy from AJA. More generally, when atrocities were committed against non-Shi’a, particularly against a Sunni population, the news was usually given a negative treatment by AJA. When the AJA news was relevant to ISIS destroying ancient antiques and sites, the coverage also tended to be negative.

The final category, encompassing just 3.1%, is news with a positive slant on ISIS. This is particularly the case when ISIS was in a strong position against the Iraqi government. For instance, two month after the fall of Mosul to ISIS, while covering events from inside Mosul was (still is) extremely difficult due to ISIS restrictions on journalism, an AJA news item claimed that the areas under their control, including Mosul, were witnessing “security and stability”. This is while, AJA continues, “experts” anticipate these areas might again be destabilized if ISIS left them. The news included photos of a functioning bakery under which AJA claimed “Mosul bakeries re-started their functioning under the control of the Islamic State”, a framing that may inaccurately suggest that the bakeries were not functioning when Mosul was under the control of the central government. Another photo was accompanied by a title that claimed ISIS is “distributing food and house equipment to people of Mosul” (Al-Jazeera, 2014f).

In some cases where the Iraqi forces were able to defeat ISIS and retake areas such as Amerli, AJA described the defeat as “tactical withdrawal” by the “Islamic State” (Al-Jazeera, 2014g). The other type of news in this category was designed to magnify ISIS’s image as a smart and invincible entity. This collection was usually referenced to some “studies” or newspapers such as the one referenced to the Los Angeles Times which spoke about the extraordinary skill of ISIS in using electronic coding apps which

“confuses intelligence apparatuses” (Al-Jazeera, 2015b). The final characteristic of this category is associated with AJA becoming a direct communicative tool for ISIS. An example of this is the broadcasting of an audio from the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, by AJA on 15 May 2015.

In May 2015 ISIS was able to gain control over the city of Ramadi after government forces pulled out in the face of their fighters. This coincided with thousands of Ramadi residents fleeing the city toward Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan. In his speech, Al-Baghdadi asked the fleeing population, which he called “the Sunnis of Iraq, particularly people of Ramadi”, to not seek asylum from the *rawafedh* (meaning rejecters, a negative term by which the jihadists refer to the Shi’a to suggest they are false Muslims) and the “apostate Kurds” and return to Ramadi given that “their brothers” (ISIS) will take care of them. AJA broadcast this audio message which was initially on ISIS websites that are less accessible to a large population than the AJA satellite TV channel (Al-Jazeera, 2015c). Significantly, ISIS seems to acknowledge such sympathy from AJA. According to Mothanna Abdulsattar, a media activist who was captured by ISIS in Syria, he was told by ISIS members, “If you are working for Orient or Al-Arabiya (two TV channels funded by Saudi Arabia) we’ll chop your head off”. However, working for “Qatar’s Al-Jazeera, according to the conversation between Abdulsattar and the ISIS members, was less of a problem” (Weiss & Hassan, 2015, p. 154).

CONCLUSION

Fandy has suggested that part of the initial support among people in the Arab world for Al-Jazeera was that people “felt their news media was not flatly lying to them as the Voice of the Arabs did in 1969”, but that subsequently audience trust has been eroding “as the station conforms to the policies of the Qatari government” (Fandy, 2007, p. 128-9) It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether, or to what degree, Arab populations’ trust in the network has eroded. However, we can make a judgement on the statement that the network increasingly conforms to Qatari state policy, especially in terms of foreign policy.

We examined coverage of events in Egypt, Syria and Iraq by AJA news and current affairs programmes over a 20-month and 12-month period respectively. Our research specifically shows that AJA coverage of Syria, Egypt and Iraq and the way it has been largely and disproportionately framed against the three regimes is consistent with the Qatari state’s political position toward them. We conclude that, particularly where the Qatari state and elite have a specific interest in conflicts in other countries, AJA coverage reflects those interests and state foreign policy imperatives. While AJE may well offer a wider range of views to Western audiences than they have been exposed to by their own ‘mainstream media’, AJA offers its audience much more limited perspectives on conflicts in the Middle East and wider Arab world. These perspectives, our research suggests, tend to reflect and thus reinforce rather than balance – let alone challenge – those of the Qatari state and elite.

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