

Global Communications

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Arab Media Systems





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8. Qatar: A Small Country with a Global Outlook¹

Ehab Galal

The State of Qatar is a new, small, and extremely rich country, ruled by the Al-Thani family and with a population of which a majority are non-Qatari nationals. It is also a country mostly known for the satellite channel *Al-Jazeera*. This cocktail of small size, royal rule, and money is crucial for understanding the media landscape in Qatar, which in basic terms must be divided between the national media and the global satellite consortium of *Al-Jazeera*. Despite their different audiences, both media types are used and managed to consolidate and strengthen the rule and influence of Qatar and the Al-Thani family.

Background

Qatar is a peninsula of 11,500 square kilometers, located on the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Surrounded by the Arabian Gulf to the north, east, and west, the coastline makes up most of the country's borders in addition to its southern border with Saudi Arabia. The country has been an independent state since 1971, when Great Britain renounced the protectorate of Qatar that had existed since the First World War. Previously, the country had been part of the Ottoman Empire for about 400 years. However, the local power has been in the hands of the

1 The research for this article formed part of the research project *Mediatized Diaspora (MEDIASP)—Contentious Politics among Arab Media Users in Europe*, which is financed by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (funding ID: 8018-00038B).

Al-Thani family since the mid-1800s, and when Great Britain decided to withdraw, negotiating with several Gulf countries, Qatar—together with Bahrain—insisted on independence instead of becoming part of a union of smaller Gulf emirates. Thus, while the UAE became the union of seven emirates, Great Britain handed over the sovereign power to the Al-Thani family in 1971 to form the independent state of Qatar. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani has been the Emir of Qatar since 2013 after he replaced his father, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, who ruled from 1995 until his abdication.

As in other Gulf countries, the majority of inhabitants are non-nationals. Out of a population of 2.8 million people in Qatar, only about 12% are Qatari. While the total number of people fluctuates because of seasonal work, the fact that the number of men is almost three times the number of women further reflects the country's large foreign labor force, which is employed by the oil and gas, construction, and related industries. The majority of labor immigrants are from Southeast Asia with smaller numbers from Arab countries, mainly Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. The official language is Arabic, but due to its oil and gas industry, its huge non-Qatari and non-Arab population, and the country's attempt to play a role in the international scene, English is a widely used second language.

Islam is the official religion of Qatar, and the national law is based on secular principles as well as Shar'ia law. Because of the high number of immigrants, other religions also exist. Statistics from 2010 estimate that 67.7% of the population are Muslims, 13.8% are Christians, 13.8% are Hindus, and 3.1% are Buddhists, whereas the rest belong to other religions or are unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2012). Most Qataris are Sunni Muslims who follow the Wahhabism tradition, while from 5% to 15% are Shi'a Muslims. Qatar allows non-Muslims to worship in specially designated locations, but they are not allowed to proselytize. Public worship is restricted, and religious groups have to formally register.

Once a poor British protectorate with its main income coming from pearling, Qatar became an affluent state with oil and natural gas resources after gaining independence. Although the oil production took off in the 1950s, and the high oil prices in the 1970s changed Qatar's economy significantly, it was the natural gas that, according to the latest Human Development Index figures by UNDP, placed Qatar as the richest

country in the world measured by gross national income per capita in 2018. Today, Qatar is the largest exporter of natural gas accounting for a third of the world trade. Due to its wealth, there is no income tax, and the state heavily supports Qatari nationals financially.

When leaving its protectorates in the Gulf, Great Britain also left border conflicts to be resolved by the countries themselves. For Qatar, there were two conflicts to solve: one with Saudi Arabia about the Khafo area and one with Bahrain about the Zabaarah area. While the latter was resolved in 2001, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly claimed its right to the Khafo area. This border conflict has recurred as soon as other conflicts in the area have broken out, and in 1992, the two countries also went through a short-term armed conflict. In this continuous conflict with Saudi Arabia, Qatar realized it was falling behind when it came to media coverage. The Saudis had strong media that were available outside Saudi Arabia, while media in Qatar were weak. It was on this premise that Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani founded the satellite television channel *Al-Jazeera* in 1996. However, he also initiated and facilitated international involvement including more active participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Al-Hawik, 2013). Both *Al-Jazeera* and Qatar's international involvement would later cause new conflicts.

Historical Developments

The media development in Qatar can be divided into three periods. In the first period, which extended from 1961 to 1995, the media were a tool for nation-building, while the second period from 1995 to 2011 was characterized by liberalization. Starting in 2011, the third period expanded Qatar's use of and investments in media as part of its soft power policy, which referred to a country's reliance on "resources of culture, values, and policies" (Nye, 2008, p. 94).

Operating in a young nation, the media in the first period came to serve as a channel for communicating national and political imaginaries. To ensure that these imaginaries were in accordance with the ideas of the ruling family, the media were either owned or subsidized by the state. The first radio was *Mosque Radio*, which started broadcasting in the beginning of the 1960s. Also, in 1961, the print media were established, and the state launched an official gazette announcing new

laws and decrees. The development of both radio and press sped up as the country moved closer to independence. On 25 June 1968, the state-run *Qatar Broadcasting Service* started transmission, and *Mosque Radio* continued transmitting for only a few months after that point. In 1969, *Qatar Radio* joined the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) under the Arab League. Starting with five hours daily transmission in 1968, *Qatar Radio* gradually increased the hours of transmission, reaching 13 hours in 1969, 19 hours in 1982, and 24 hours on 27 June 2003 (Al-Mua'ssasah Al-Qatariya lili'laam, 2018). In 1971, transmission in English followed, Urdu in 1980, and French in 1983 (Al-Jaber, 2012, p. 56). In 1992, *Qur'an Radio* was established with programs on the Qur'an and Hadith, Islamic science, and debate of modern issues. From its inception until today, the role of radio has been to communicate the identity and heritage of Qatar. Consequently, around 85% of the programs are locally produced. The rest are imported programs that include documentaries, religious programs, songs, and plays (Al-Mua'ssasah Al-Qatariya lili'laam, 2018).

Compared with other Arab countries, the print media emerged in Qatar rather late. The reasons were the lack of printing presses and high illiteracy, among others (Mellor, Ayish, Dajani, & Rinnawi, 2011, p. 53). Starting in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the state launched a number of magazines covering different issues. In the 1970s, the transfer of professional foreign workers, among them journalists, to the new, rich Qatar, established a basis for setting up professional media. In 1969, *Al-Mash'al* magazine, which focused on oil and energy, was released together with *Al-Doha* magazine, which focused on culture and arts and was issued by the newly established Department of Information. In 1970, *Education* magazine was published by the Ministry of Education. In 1977, the sports magazine *Al-Saqr* was issued by the Ministry of Defense, and in 1980, the monthly *Al-Umma* began publication, which focused on Islamic matters and was issued by the Presidency of Shar'ia Courts and Religious Affairs in the State of Qatar. In 1986, the state decided to close down all the Qatari state's magazines as a result of declining oil prices.

In addition to the state press, the private press also appeared in the 1970s. Though media outlets were entitled to be private, the state ensured their loyalty by providing financial support to local newspapers until the early 1990s, when the funding was suspended. The first private magazines were *Al-Urooba* and *Gulf News*, launched in 1970. The latter

was an English-language magazine that was published twice a month. In 1972, the *Al-Arab* newspaper started publishing as the first political daily, and in 1974, *Al-'Ahd* became the first political weekly. The first women's magazine, *Mijalit Al-Johara*, and the first sports newspaper, *Al-Dawri*, both appeared in 1977. *Al-Arab* was closed in 1996 after the death of its founder Abdullah Hussein Nema when the heirs sold the license of the newspaper, which did not reappear until 2007.

As for television broadcasting, *Qatar TV* began broadcasting in black and white in 1970 and color in 1974. Starting with a few hours in Arabic, it extended its transmission to nine daily hours when introducing color television. Similar to other Arab countries, a foreign language channel was soon introduced. *Channel 2* in English started broadcasting in 1982 with programs on culture, sports, and entertainment, including those of foreign production (Al-Jaber, 2012, p. 58).

The second period of media development was initiated in 1995 when the new Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, introduced his reform program. Due to new freedom from interference by the government, international newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *The Financial Times* and *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* became available in Qatar (Al-Jaber, 2012, pp. 49–50). Also, Qatari media appeared nationally, for example, with *Al-Watan* newspaper which offered more critical coverage of national issues in Qatar, and transnationally with the launch of *Al-Jazeera*.

Qatar opened up to the world and this was the beginning of a third period starting in 2011, when Qatar expanded the *Al-Jazeera* network by launching several new international channels, allowed private television in Qatar, and increasingly backed and/or financed media based in or outside Qatar. Strongly induced by the Arab uprisings, *Al-Jazeera* now openly supported Arab oppositions such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Islamist opposition in Tunisia, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Thus, during the Libyan Civil War in 2011, *Libya Al-Ahrar TV*, a Libyan television channel, started broadcasting by satellite from Doha. Its focus was Libya's revolution and its political future. In 2012, the first private television channel *Al-Rayyan TV* was launched to specifically target the Qatari community. Its support for the Qatar National Vision 2030 and emphasis on Qatari history and tradition illustrates its loyalty towards the regime. In 2016, it launched its second channel. Another example

is the Qatari online and print newspaper *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* and the *Al-Araby* television network, both based in London (Roberts, 2014). This multidirectional media strategy reflects Qatar's soft power policy, which includes the support of not only Islamist oppositions but also liberal voices, such as the Egyptians Alaa Al-Aswany, Iman Nour, and others, who continuously have been allowed speaking time at *Al-Jazeera*.

A study of media use from 2010 to 2012 showed that Qataris still preferred daily newspapers as a source of local news in contrast to expatriates that increasingly preferred online media (Meeds, 2015). As of 2019, Qatar had four daily newspapers in Arabic: *Al-Arab*, established in 1972, *Al-Raya* (1979), *Al-Sharq* (1987), and *Al-Watan* (1995), and three in English: *Gulf Times* (1978), *Peninsula* (1996), and *Qatar Tribune* (2006). All papers are pro-government with regular headlines about and links to the ruling family and offer little criticism of domestic or foreign policy. With regard to television, the population in Qatar prefer different types of programming. Whereas Qatari nationals and Arab expats primarily watch television programming on free television (72% and 64%, respectively), Asian and Western expats prefer to watch subscription television (44% and 57%). The reason is probably that subscription television offers another kind of programming that is more attractive to non-Arabs (Meeds, 2015).

Political System and Legal Framework

The political system in Qatar is based on the acknowledgement of the Emir's sovereign authority. The Emir is not only the head of state, but also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The power is based on the separation of the legislative powers held by the Al-Shura Council, the executive powers headed by the Emir, and the juridical powers in the hands of the courts. Political parties are not permitted, and the only elections for direct representation are for the Central Municipal Council that has 29 elected members and an advisory role (Freedom House, 2019). The council was founded in the 1950s, but free elections took place for the first time in 1999. In that election, women were able to participate for the first time, both as voters and candidates. On the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' English website, the election is highlighted as "a historic event" that "represented the first steps of the country towards democracy in its civil sense," also highlighting the new role

of women (Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Qatar, 2019). As such, the elections are still used as a showcase for the democratic intentions of the country. In 2003, a referendum took place giving the Qataris the right to vote for the country's first constitution. This happened, however, without mobilizing the citizens or fostering any wider public discussion (Al-Hawik, 2013, pp. 236–37).

When Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani came to power through a coup removing his father from the throne in June 1995, he inherited an autocratic country built on tribal structure. His ambition was to build a civil society by introducing a number of legal reforms, including more freedom for national media. Looking closely, however, it appears that he, and later his son, had endorsed a policy that carefully navigated a balance between transformation and status quo or, in other words, between liberalization and control.

Qatar's first official censorship law was issued in 1979 with the aim to regulate and control the press, publishing houses, bookstores, artistic production, and advertising agencies. Based on the law, many non-Qatari newspapers and books were forbidden to be imported because they were not in accordance with the government's political, economic, or religious perspectives adopted as the basis for nation-building. The responsibility of regulating media, particularly radio and television, has been ceded to different institutions. Starting with the Media Department that was established in 1969, the Ministry of Information followed in 1974, which later became the Ministry of Information and Culture in 1990 (Al-Mua'ssasah Al-Qatariya lili'laam, 2018). In 1998, the new Emir abolished the Ministry as the controlling body of all media activities, including media censorship, thereby sending a strong signal of his wish to create freer media. As an alternative, the National Council for Culture, Arts and Heritage and the Qatar General Broadcasting and Television Corporation were founded as independent bodies to promote free public debate. In 2009, the Qatar Media Corporation was established as the official broadcasting authority for the state of Qatar. It carries on its dual role of pursuing the newest updates of media and technology while "maintaining and enforcing broadcast standards and content guidelines and developing programming that promotes Qatar's interests" (Government of Qatar, 2020).

In the new constitution from 2003, Article 48 states: "Freedom of the press, printing and publication shall be guaranteed *in accordance to the law*." According to Anas (2012–2013), the old press law from 1979 continued to be in force, even after Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani announced his visions for a new Qatar, as no other law was drafted before 2011. By referring to the 1979 law, it was possible to practice censorship of both domestic and foreign publications, as well as broadcast media, "for religious, political, and sexual content prior to distribution" (Anas, 2012–2013, p. 37). Furthermore, according to Anas, similar to cases in other Arab countries, one could be prosecuted for criticizing the government, the ruling family, or Islam. Although the Advisory Council had drafted a new press law in 2011, it had still not been approved by the Emir in 2016. The law was particularly intended to protect journalists against prosecution, while regulating the online media (Freedom House, 2019). Finally, in September 2018, a new draft law was approved by the government to regulate and organize the circulation of publications, publishing, media activities, and arts. In the Qatari daily *Gulf Times*, this law was presented as an answer to the technological development and protection of freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, and human rights. It abolishes prison sentences for publishing with reference to freedom of expression, but it also incorporates the publications and Publishing Law of 1979 and the Decree Law of 1993 on regulating the practice of advertising, public relations, artistic production, and artistic works. The freedom of journalists is assured, but the law also emphasizes the general obligation to abide by the code of ethics of the press (*Gulf Times*, 2019). Importantly, other laws such as the anti-terrorism legislation and the cybercrime law also restrict media and freedom of expression. The cybercrime law criminalizes the distribution of "false news" the violation of "social values or principles" online behavior that threatens state security, and online defamation. Violation may lead to either imprisonment or huge fines (Freedom House, 2019).

This development of press and media freedom is two-sided. On one hand, a number of reforms have been introduced to strengthen the presence of free media in Qatar. On the other hand, restrictions by the state are still more the rule than the exception, although they might have become more subtle. The many changes of laws and bodies involved in

managing media reflect the ambivalent policies that the Qatari regime adopts when simultaneously promoting freedom and restricting access to power. The overall result of this media climate is that most outlets adopt a government-friendly approach and perform considerable self-censorship (Freedom House, 2019).

The most famous result of the attempts of liberalization was Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani's establishment of *Al-Jazeera TV* in 1996. In contrast to the national media that work to strengthen the Qatari regime within the national framework, *Al-Jazeera* was directed towards a transnational audience and enhancing the position of Qatar transnationally. The channel quickly became a tool to amplify the influence and visibility of a small country, becoming an instrument for Qatar's soft power strategy.

Excursus: *Al-Jazeera*

Al-Jazeera TV, later known as *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, has become the most influential Arab television station internationally. The local presence of its correspondents during the US-led invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and later the Arab uprisings, has especially made the coverage of the station into a reference for international media. The network is viewed as an exception, both in Qatar and the Arab world, due to its critical outlook and global reach. From the beginning, it was organized as a private satellite television station, regardless of being established and financed by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani. *Al-Jazeera* became an element in his strategy of reaching out globally to constitute a new and stronger position of the country, while at the same time promoting new ideas of Arab democracy and critical thinking. Internationally, the Emir tried to create better relations with a number of countries such as Israel and Iran, and Qatar came to act as a mediator in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Sudan, Eritrea, and Pakistan (Miles, 2010).

Since its establishment, *Al-Jazeera* has grown gradually from a small studio in a small Arab capital to a large transnational network of various thematic television channels that offers a multi-channel, multi-platform, and multilingual package addressing a global audience. It has offices around the world as well as online platforms. *Al-Jazeera Mubasher/Live* was launched in 2005 and transmits live events and debates on

current issues 24/7. *Al-Jazeera English* was launched as a news channel on 15 November 2006. In 2011, *Al-Jazeera Balkan* started transmitting international news from its headquarters in Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr* covered the Egyptian uprisings in the period from 2011 to 2013, when the President Morsi, aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, was removed from power. In the period from 2013 to 2016, *Al-Jazeera America* was offering the Americans a perspective on the Middle East while prioritizing American news with the ambition to create a mix between *CNN America* and *CNN International*. Also in 2013, *Al-Jazeera Sport* was rebranded under the name *beIN Sports*. In addition to its many news channels, the network added *Al-Jazeera Children's Channel* (2005) and *Al-Jazeera Documentary* (2007). In 2014, the *Al-Jazeera* media network launched the online news site *Al-Jazeera Turk* in Turkish. The aim was later to establish a television channel, *Al-Jazeera Turk*, in Turkey. This never became a reality, because the online version did not succeed and was shut down in 2017.

Al-Jazeera has its own training center and a media research institute. The staff is international, comprising journalists educated in Western countries, and has a broad network of correspondents worldwide. Similar to *CNN* and *BBC*, *Al-Jazeera Arabic* transmits around the clock, but the programs are more varied, combining news coverage with political and cultural programming. From the very start, the network adopted a confrontational style, addressing issues considered taboo in the Arab world, thereby indirectly challenging Arab national media's ability to control the coverage of a story. However, it has been criticized for its uncritical coverage of Qatar's ruling family.

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, *Al-Jazeera Arabic* started to become an important player in the coverage of conflicts inside and outside of the Arab world, where its strength—and vulnerability—have been its physical presence in conflict areas. The channel's critical coverage of global conflict has since then stirred up controversy and conflict inside and outside of the Arab world. Its unpopularity among Arab regimes has triggered several attempts to restrict the channel by closing down *Al-Jazeera's* local or regional offices periodically or permanently. In particular, *Al-Jazeera's* coverage of and presence in the epicenter of global conflicts, including the American invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, the Gulf Wars, and the Arab uprisings, have triggered

such responses. In any conflict it has covered, the network has been accused of being biased and has therefore been given numerous and often contradictory labels such as pro-Iraqi, pro-Israeli, pro-American, pro-Taliban, etc. (Sakr, 2006). During the Arab uprisings of 2010–2011, the channel played a significant role by providing the Arab and global audiences with live coverage of street protests, while clearly siding with the protesters against dictatorships. This univocal positioning once again made Qatar unpopular among Arab regimes.

Economy and Ownership Patterns

In Qatar, there is a tendency for the media to be either state-owned, owned by prominent members of the ruling family and/or government, or by businessmen with close connections to the ruling elite. Thus, all radio stations in Qatar are government-owned, whereas the *Al-Raya* and *Gulf Times* newspapers are owned by a private company led by a board that includes the oil minister, a former senior official, and several prominent businessmen. The *Al-Watan* newspaper, launched after the Emir's abolishment of censorship in 1995, introduced a more critical approach to local issues, but was owned by the foreign minister in association with a leading businessperson (Rugh, 2004). The paper adopted a relatively critical policy, which got it into trouble vis-à-vis with a number of ministries and institutions, and a court case was initiated against its editor Ahmad Ali (KUNA, 2001). Also, both existing *Al-Sharq* and *Peninsula* newspapers were owned or co-owned by the Qatari foreign minister (Rugh, 2004).

A characteristic of the third period, starting in 2011, has been the investment in media in all forms as part of Qatar's soft power policy and a strategic direction in its relationships with regional and international allies and enemies. Most of Qatar's new media ventures are, however, based outside Qatar, perhaps to avoid any escalation of conflict with its neighboring countries or to be relieved from the pressure they exert in the region. Whereas *Qatar TV* is state-owned, *Al-Rayyan TV* was launched in 2012 by Al-Rayyan Media and Marketing Company that also had produced programs for *Qatar TV*. The *Libya Al-Ahrar TV* is mostly funded by Libyan expatriate businessmen, while Qatar provides facilities and technical staff through *Al-Rayyan TV*. A

Qatari-owned private holding company, *Fadaat Media*, owns *Al-Araby TV* and the *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* newspaper, but both were initiated by Azmi Bishara. Bishara is a prominent Christian Israeli Palestinian, who is a secularist and pan-Arabist. He is the chairman of *Fadaat Media* and *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* network, also functions as advisor to the Emir, and is the director of the Doha Institute (Roberts, 2014). *Fadaat Media* also owns *Syria TV*, a satellite channel that has been broadcasting from Istanbul. Over concern that the diversity of digital media outlets has been limited, there are allegations that they are being financed by Qatari media companies, but it is difficult to get a confirmation of exact ownership. Furthermore, in 2017, a media city was established in Doha in order to make Qatar attractive to international and regional media outlets. To further this effort, the city advertises that it offers the newest technologies and provides no editorial limits except for a code of ethics.

Regarding *Al-Jazeera's* funding, the intention from the outset was transferring it to pure private financing after five years of operation. While part of its financing comes from advertising, it is rather unclear how it is financed today, with no doubt that Qatar still supports the channel and its offspring financially. In 2014, *beIN Sports* was separated from *Al-Jazeera* and now operates 60 channels across 34 countries. In 2016, it also bought Turkey's largest pay-television operator, *Digitürk*, profiting from the rapid growth of pay-television in the Middle East (Oxford Business Group, 2018).

Regionally, Qatar is one of the biggest spenders on advertising. Newspapers are the most important platform, with online channels being a new platform. Advertisers have changed over time, not the least due to lower oil and gas revenues, but the state remains the dominant advertiser and spends "on advertising for major projects, such as infrastructure improvements and initiatives under the framework of Qatar Vision 2030" (Oxford Business Group, 2018).

Technology and Infrastructure

With the access to satellite technology, Qatar followed the trend practiced by other Arab countries and transformed its ground television station to satellite television in 1998, transmitting via the satellites

ArabSat, *NileSat*, and *Hot Bird*. In 1993, Qataris already had access to 31 satellite channels via the Qatari cable system network known as *Qatar Cablevision (QCV)*, challenging the monopoly of *Qatar TV* by offering channels such *CNN*, *BBC*, *Fox Sports*, and Arab satellite channels (Miles, 2013, p. 43). With the rapidly increasing number of Arab satellite channels, *Qatar TV* in 2000 changed the format of the channel in response to the growing competition. It changed its logo, style of programs, intervals, and announcements, and new young faces appeared on the screen. Despite the competition from outside, *Qatar TV* is still popular among viewers in Qatar, whereas many Qataris feel alienated by *Al-Jazeera*, according to Miles (2013, pp. 44–45). The Qatari satellite company *Es'hailSat* launched the country's first satellite in 2013 to support *beIN Sports* and the *Al-Jazeera* network. In 2018, it launched its second satellite and began offering commercial services in the region. In the telecommunications realm, the only provider of Internet in Qatar is the government-owned *Qatar Public Telecommunications Corporation (Q-Tel)*. Owning the entire IT infrastructure, it provides a list of banned websites and blocks material that is deemed as being against Qatari values. An example is *Doha News*, which was blocked in November 2016. As a private initiative, it had developed from a *Twitter* account, then a *Tumblr* blog, to a popular English-language website that was not afraid of criticizing Qatari politics. In the end, the owners sold *Doha News* to a foreign company due to problems with getting licensed (Napieralski, 2018). When raising a case, the authorities typically warn the local journalists, while non-Qataris employed by Qatari media outlets risk being deported or imprisoned.

With regard to Internet use, a six-country (Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) study by Northwestern University in Qatar found that Qataris are "among the most digitally connected citizens in the Arab Region" (Dennis, Martin & Wood, 2017). According to this study, 95% of the population has access to the Internet, and they spend 60% more time online than the populations from the other five Arab countries of the survey. They also found that, while the most popular social networks are *Facebook*, *WhatsApp*, *YouTube*, and *Instagram*, the users in Qatar spend less time playing video games or using *Facebook* in comparison with the other five countries. Instead, they use the Internet to watch news, comedy, sport, and religious/spiritual

programs online. The study also showed that watching television online, either by streaming or download, is practiced by a third of Internet users in Qatar. Arab expats seem to especially prefer this option. The Internet appears to have become the most preferred form of media for users who are interested in political news (Meeds, 2015).

Challenges

Qatar's transnational media expansion has created a major source of conflict in recent years. In 2014, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt, the only non-member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), accused Qatar of supporting or financing terrorist groups in Egypt and Yemen. As a result, Qatar entered into a deal with the Gulf states not to support hostile media that function as a platform for opposition groups in other countries in the region. Later, another deal followed where Bahrain, UAE, and Qatar agreed to support the stability in Egypt and to prevent *Al-Jazeera* from working as a platform for opposition groups. These agreements seemed to have postponed the conflict from escalating after it broke out in 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain demanded that Qatar close down *Al-Jazeera*. The new Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, refused. This led Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and UAE to break off all diplomatic relations with Qatar in June 2017. Shortly after, Yemen, the Maldives, Mauritania, and Senegal also severed their relations with Qatar. Jointly, the countries would later present 13 demands that had to be met before contact could be resumed. Among these demands were to minimize contact with Iran and associated groups (a not very subtle reference to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza), to shut down the Turkish military base in Qatar, to stop financing terrorism, to stop all relations with terrorist organizations and individuals, and to shut down *Al-Jazeera*. Qatar rejected all accusations, demanded proof of the allegations, and refused to close down *Al-Jazeera* with reference to the need for freedom of the press (Naheem, 2017). This incident clearly illustrates how media are used to legitimize a political conflict, which in this case, according to Naheem (2017), has been a media war between UAE and Qatar. The conflict also underlines how *Al-Jazeera* plays a particular role as a transnational tool of Qatar's foreign policy. Where local national media in Qatar risk repercussions should they forget

their loyalty towards the Qatari rulers, the same rulers use *Al-Jazeera* to position themselves within a conflictive international political field with no intention of restricting their activities.

Outlook

In the young nation of Qatar, with its history of around 50 years of national media, media play a key role in the construction of a modern Qatari state. Whereas the national media are restricted by regulations that assure their loyalty to the Qatari nation and its conservative values, the investments in and/or support of transnational media, including *Al-Jazeera*, play the role of strengthening the sovereignty—and more liberal values—of Qatar in an Arab region haunted by conflict. By concentrating media ownership among the ruling family and loyal businesspeople and setting up restrictions for obtaining media licenses, the Qatari rulers manage to control the national narrative and their own power. To control the international responses to *Al-Jazeera* appears more of a challenge, but until now, the Qatari rulers have not given in to threats and demands from outside. Two key issues will be crucial to the future media landscape of Qatar. One is how the continuous struggle with other Arab countries concerning *Al-Jazeera* evolves. As a small country, Qatar is dependent on international collaboration, and therefore, one likely scenario is that the countries will find a compromise where *Al-Jazeera* moderates the critique of other Arab regimes or turns its attention to other countries. However, if political changes in neighboring countries, such as Saudi Arabia, do in fact occur, Qatar may need to find new allies, which potentially could strengthen the role of *Al-Jazeera*. Another key issue concerns the advancement of new technologies wherein Qatar has invested heavily. This applies to technology itself but also to investments in Arab and English online news media globally, which have particularly provided Qatar with new platforms for influencing Arab perceptions of national and regional politics and identities. Although it is difficult to predict the future, Qatar will still be a small country with a majority of non-Qatari inhabitants, which makes it essential for the rulers to protect and control the symbolic (and physical) borders internally as well as externally.

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