AL JAZEERA’S BOOMING VOICE: DEVELOPING QATAR’S COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

John Williams

Introduction

As it celebrates its tenth anniversary, Al Jazeera is perhaps the most famous and infamous media outlet on the planet. With approximately 45-50 million viewers worldwide, Al Jazeera rose to global prominence through its coverage of the tumultuous events that have rocked the Middle East and Central Asia over the last six years, but was a sensation among Arabic-speaking audiences the world over from its initial broadcasts in 1996 as the first major satellite news channel in Arabic originating in the Middle East. According to some thinkers, the channel has established itself as the leader of a modern revival of pan-Arab sentiment and identity as an independent medium originating in the Arabic language, evoking comparisons to the likes of al-Hilal, al-Risala, Umm Kalthoum, and Farid Al-Atrash, for its ability to capture the attention of all Arabs.

Through its willingness to tackle regionally taboo subjects ranging from orthodox religious practice to autocratic governance to sexuality in the Arab world, the programming of Al Jazeera stirred intense interest both by the regimes and governments of the Middle East and by the ‘man in the street’. It was its unique access and unparalleled coverage of the Coalition invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent broadcasts of messages from Osama bin-Laden, however, that brought it into the international spotlight. Its coverage of the Iraq war only further cemented its prominent position as a formidable international news outlet. Speaking about Al Jazeera, Philip Seib of the College of Communication at Marquette University argues, “Although the United States proved in its invasion of Iraq that it retains dominance in military power, this war marked an end to the near monopoly in global news that American and other western media had long enjoyed”. The broadcaster has been lauded for its unflinching commitment to its admirable motto, “The opinion and the other opinion”, through providing a forum in which all issues and all sides of an issue are open for discussion. It has been the subject of intense criticism, particularly in the wake of its broadcast of Osama bin Laden’s messages in the months after the September 11th attacks. Because of its coverage, Al Jazeera has been called everything from a strong force for democracy in the Middle East to the mouthpiece of terrorism to an inflammatory propaganda machine threatening the very same Arab unity
that others argue it has revived. Exuberant praise and loathing criticism have been heaped on a station founded by the emir of one of the smallest countries in the world before it has even reached its tenth birthday.

Commendation and condemnation aside, it is the notoriety and attention that Al Jazeera has received that matters most to its sponsor, the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, and its home country. Though perhaps the most visible of Sheikh Hamad’s progressive initiatives since his ascent to power in 1995, Al Jazeera is but a part of the emir’s efforts to create a comparative advantage in media and education and differentiate his tiny country from its neighbors. The discovery of the third-largest natural gas reserves in the world, the relationship that Qatar has developed with the United States and the West, and a number of economic and liberalizing reforms that Sheikh Hamad and his regime have spearheaded have changed Qatar from a moderately rich, little-known Gulf oil producer to a major player in the international community with influence and importance that far outweighs what one might expect from a country of under 200,000 nationals. The role that the success of Al Jazeera has played within the context of Qatar’s rise to prominence and its potential for influencing Arab and Muslim opinion and reform beyond the Arab world are the main foci of this paper.

Some have argued that Al Jazeera is nothing but a propaganda outlet for radical Islamic movements. Others criticize it for fear that it will undermine Middle Eastern autocracies. I argue that perhaps Al Jazeera’s most important function, as conceived of by its sponsor, Sheikh al-Thani, is to raise Qatar’s profile in the and the world by differentiating Qatar from its neighbors, establishing it as a regional player to be reckoned with, creating and maintaining a ‘comparative advantage’ in media and education vis-à-vis other Arab countries, and reinforcing and potentially spreading the tentative steps toward political opening that Qatar’s emir has been advancing throughout his ten years on the throne. In order to examine this argument, it is necessary to briefly discuss Al Jazeera’s origins and purpose, and how they depend on Sheikh Hamad’s rise and reign. Furthermore in order to understand the channel’s potential impact, it is important to briefly examine Al Jazeera’s reach among Arabs and non-Arabs, as well as among the governments of the Middle East and the West, and their reaction to the channel’s programming to see how it has raised Qatar’s profile regionally and internationally. I will also look at how Al Jazeera has acted as a catalyst for gradual opening in Qatar and possibly in the societies and polities of its neighbors. Then I will look at what other initiatives sponsored or supported by Sheikh al-Thani, considered together with his views and support of Al Jazeera, could indicate about a developing ‘comparative advantage’ for Qatar in Arabic-language broadcasting and education in the region. Finally I will briefly discuss some of the future initiatives planned for Al Jazeera, particularly the English-language Al Jazeera International, and how they relate to this general concept of ‘comparative advantage’ for Qatar in the future.
The Origins of Al Jazeera, Its Programming and World Reactions

No discussion of Al Jazeera’s origins would make sense without a brief exploration of the socio-political climate preceding its launch. On June 27, 1995 Crown Prince Hamad bin-Khalifa Al-Thani, the eldest son of then-emir, Sheikh Khalifa, seized the throne of Qatar from his father in a peaceful coup, proclaiming himself Emir of Qatar while the former monarch was vacationing in France. Some argue that the main reason behind Sheikh Hamad’s seize of power was that he had grown increasingly uneasy over his father’s seemingly random changes in the Qatari government and his generally conservative policy approach for the country. While in Qatar between vacations in early 1995, Sheikh Khalifa suddenly and unexplainably demoted one son from his position of Prime Minister and replaced him with another. Rather than risk a similar fate, Crown Prince Hamad took action in a peaceful coup. Within approximately a year after he took power, Sheikh Hamad had largely consolidated his authority and already had begun making moves toward major changes in Qatari society and politics, achieving reconciliation with his father in 1997. Whereas his predecessor had taken the position that Qatar would do best by refraining from moving ahead of its neighbors culturally, economically or politically, Sheikh Hamad had a very different idea for the future of Qatar, saying that his country ‘should be known and noticed’.4

During the first year of his reign, Sheikh Hamad founded Al Jazeera, or ‘the peninsula’, an Arabic-language satellite news channel that was to enjoy press freedom and non-interference from the government that underwrote its costs. The sheikh’s intention to differentiate Qatar’s media from its Gulf neighbors was clear from the very selection of the name for the new station. Prior to the establishment of the Al Jazeera channel, the term ‘the peninsula’ inevitably referred to Qatar’s much larger and better-connected neighbor, Saudi Arabia.

With a cousin of Sheikh Hamad, Sheikh Hamad bin Tamir Al-Thani, as chairman of Al Jazeera, the newly forming channel took advantage of an opportunity that a perfect storm of events in the Arabic-language media market generated. Throughout most of the history of television broadcasting in the Arab world, programming had been characterized by state-controlled channels that were under the authority of each country’s Ministry of Information and heavily subject to censorship. Though some entertainment-oriented programming was respectable, particularly out of Egypt, news programs were dominated by protocol reporting that focused on the day-to-day schedules of the leader of the country and various other important officials and rarely utilized modern field reporting techniques or ‘breaking news’ formats, as those formats would have been incompatible with the censorship that was imposed by the Ministries of Information. Moreover, though five satellites serving Arab countries were in operation by 1995, broadcasting approximately sixty channels to the Arab world, none of these
channels enjoyed what Westerners would consider ‘press freedom’. One of the satellite channels broadcasting in the mid-1990s was Orbit, a channel founded by a cousin of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, which broadcast from Rome.

In order to tap into a potentially lucrative market space for television news originating in Arabic, not translated, the BBC and Orbit signed a ten-year agreement to initiate an Arabic BBC news service in March of 1994, which the BBC insisted would be governed by the same values and journalistic integrity as its World Service, but that the Saudi owners of Orbit maintained must be ‘culturally sensitive’ to the reality of the Arab world. After two major confrontations in the first 18 months of the channel’s existence, the Saudi backers pulled out of the venture. Most of the predominantly Arab staff of the now defunct broadcaster, many of whom had been trained and possessed significant professional experience with the BBC and other Western media outlets, was suddenly out of work. The leadership of Al Jazeera took advantage of the opportunity, soliciting a subsidy from the Qatari government to hire the reporters, editors and other profession staff of the now defunct operation. Sheikh Hamad provided the approximately $140 million in initial funds to get Al Jazeera off the ground and supply operating support through November 2001. The goal was for the channel to be financially independent through the sale of advertising, video and homegrown programming by that time, however Al Jazeera still remains dependent upon support from the Qatari government for operating revenues today. The network relies on approximately $30-40 million annually from the emir, and much has been made of this funding and the emir’s potential for influencing the station’s editorial policies by some of Al Jazeera’s critics.

Though its coverage of the Second Palestinian Intifada, beginning in the Fall of 2000, and subsequently the Coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq brought it to global prominence, Al Jazeera’s programming between its launch and the Intifada helped the channel to establish a wide and loyal following in the Arab world. Many of its programs that are still popular today were first-of-their-kind in the direct and open way they dealt with subjects like regional government corruption, polygamy and sexuality, women’s rights, and Islamic fundamentalism. These topics were traditionally taboo or at least infrequently discussed in Islamic Arab countries and were almost totally avoided by other state-sponsored terrestrial and satellite broadcast outlets. Shows like “More than One Opinion”, “Without Borders”, “The Opposite Direction”, “Religion and Life” and “For Women Only” were unique at their launch and over time drew substantial and regular audiences because of their participatory format and unrestrained discussions. Due to their drastic departure from traditional formats and topics in Arabic programming, it took some of the shows awhile to develop substantial popularity, but once audiences were convinced that Al Jazeera’s motto, “The opinion and the other opinion”, was really going to be followed, the programs quickly gained a near zealous following. According to veteran reporter Hugh Miles in his book on the history and development of Al Jazeera, “The Op-
posite Direction took some months to reach its zenith of popularity, because at first guests were unsure about participating in something so radical. Once it did, it was simply quite unlike anything ever seen before on television in Arabic.

In addition to its talk shows, Al Jazeera’s news formats were revolutionarily different from the tired, staid, protocol-focused broadcasts of the older, state-run channels. The news and program format differences were due in large part to the fact that so many of the editors, reporters and even technicians at Al Jazeera were trained in Western media outlets. Field reporting and live interview formats had been rarely if ever used by traditional Arabic media, because of complications for censorship. Guests on Al Jazeera’s programs come from all along the spectrum of Arab and Middle Eastern political persuasion and leadership, ranging from liberal secularists to Islamic fundamentalists, and a variety of world leaders including Libya’s President Col. Muammar Qadhafi, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, former US Secretary of State Colin Powell and then-US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. Due to these controversial guests and, perhaps, due even more to Al Jazeera’s news style and the topics that its popular call-in shows have tackled, the channel inspired a wide variety of reaction among Arab and Western governments.

Tentatively supportive of Al Jazeera’s potential role for bringing more open political life and liberalization to the Arab world initially, the US government and public policy community came to change their opinion of the network, particularly after the 9/11 attacks and the initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. As Walter Ambrust, chairman of the Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal editorial board points out, “In the late 1990s, many an academic conference in the US promoted Al Jazeera as the Great White Hope of civil society in the Middle East… The ‘Al Jazeera effect’ was putatively to spread such truthfulness (debates and criticism of Arab governments) to other stations, and, as the reach of satellite broadcasting extended to more and more homes, to the social grassroots.” In the fall of 2001, the US government showed that it understood the depth of Al Jazeera’s reach in the Arabic speaking world in sending Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to do interviews on Al Jazeera’s programs to explain the American position on Afghanistan and the Taliban and its desire for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However that same fall, Al Jazeera became Osama bin Laden’s chosen conduit through which he communicated with the outside world. Al Jazeera aired three of his communiqués during October and November 2001 in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and leading up to the Coalition operations in Afghanistan. It is interesting to note that British Prime Minister Tony Blair also appeared on the network during the Afghan operation, as ‘part of a tactical diplomatic offensive to sustain the fragile coalition behind the military strikes’, according to Hugh Miles. “He chose to deliver his message on Al Jazeera for the same reasons that bin Laden did,” implying that regardless of political position or purpose, interna-
tional actors were increasingly choosing to communicate with the Arabic speaking world through Al Jazeera, recognizing its reach and credibility. A short time after the airing of the bin Laden tapes and the beginning of operations in Afghanistan, however, the American attitude toward Al Jazeera became increasingly hostile, with Secretary Rumsfeld describing the channel as ‘working in concert with terrorists’ and later causing ‘great harm in Iraq by continuously broadcasting wrong and inaccurate information, impairing what the coalition forces are trying to achieve in Iraq’. Increasingly that sentiment has accurately captured the general attitude toward Al Jazeera in the West, particularly in the US and UK, from both government officials and some prominent members of the public policy community. Dr. Fouad Ajami, chair of Middle Eastern studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, remarked in a now famous article about Al Jazeera in November of 2001, “Although Al Jazeera has sometimes been hailed in the West for being an autonomous Arabic news outlet, it would be a mistake to call it a fair and responsible one. Day in and day out, Al Jazeera deliberately fans the flame of Muslim outrage.”

This kind of controversy was nothing new for the channel. From the beginning, the programs on Al Jazeera had angered almost every government in the Middle East at least one time, resulting in the closure of bureaus and, in some cases, the withdrawal of ambassadors from Doha. Kuwait, Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and virtually every other Arab government have taken diplomatic action in response to programming on Al Jazeera at one point or another. They have argued that programming, particularly from Al Jazeera’s uncensored audience participation and call-in shows, foments dissent, undermines order, sympathizes with Israel or otherwise engages in discussion that challenges the authority and legitimacy that these mostly authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes claim. A detailed catalogue of the various disputes that have arisen between Arab governments and the Qatari government is not the point of this paper, but it is important to note that whenever Sheikh Hamad or the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jabr bin Jasr Al-Thani, respond to foreign criticism of Qatar because of what airs on Al Jazeera, however they strongly and consistently maintain that Al Jazeera is a press outlet in a country that provides freedom of the press and that the government has no control in its production or coverage, nor does it seek such control. Likewise Al Jazeera’s editors always respond that they are committed to upholding its motto, “The opinion and the other opinion,” regardless of the response it might inspire, for the benefit of the audience.

Regardless of what part of the spectrum of opinion one agrees with, it is impossible to deny the tremendous impact that Al Jazeera’s news and programming have in the Arabic-speaking world and beyond. Leaders of the most powerful countries in the world have done interviews on Al Jazeera, knowing that it is the most effective way to reach Arab audiences. Ambassadors have been withdrawn and diplomatic
relations suspended with Qatar because of the challenges that the topics and discussion of the channel's programs pose to the regimes of Qatar's neighbors. Though Qatar's government and Al Jazeera's management maintain that the broadcaster is entirely independent, one cannot help but imagine that neither is unhappy with the notoriety Al Jazeera has achieved for itself and for Qatar, and the attention it receives for being arguably the most independent, though controversial, Arabic broadcaster.

Al Jazeera and Democratic Opening in the Arab World

Although the hope that Al Jazeera has the potential to be a positive force for opening and democratization in the Middle East has faded particularly among Western governments, others in the policy community and Arab intellectual community believe that possibility still exists, largely within the context of the opportunity for satellite broadcasting in general to be such a force. In addition, some argue that Arabic satellite broadcasting could lead to a regeneration of pan-Arabism throughout the Middle East, which could be a positive support to solving some of the region's most challenging problems. The proliferation of satellite technology and the changes in news reporting and programming formats, arguably pioneered by Al Jazeera and copied to varying extents by other Arabic language outlets, are the most important developments in Arabic media that contribute to more open societies. The competition brought about by the dramatic increase in satellite channels in Arabic that have sought to match Al Jazeera’s success has also had beneficial effects. Satellite dishes, and thus free to air satellite broadcasts like Al Jazeera, MBC and others, have been relatively affordable in the Middle East since the late 1990s, costing only around $100. No longer only for the rich, one is just as likely to find satellite dishes mounted next to the window of a crowded apartments in Gaza as in a posh neighborhood of Abu Dhabi.

As Abdallah Schleifer and Jon Alterman argue, the spread of satellite technology and the regionalization of Arabic language media has led to a ‘marketization’ of the environment, in which viewers now have real choice over what they watch instead of only being able to access state-dominated and censored broadcasts. The proliferation of Arabic broadcasters, many of which were also launched in the late 1990s seeking to mimic Al Jazeera’s success, particularly Saudi-owned Al Arabiya, has led to competition that has benefited not only viewers but also the prospects for effective and professional journalism. Journalists are less likely to include personal ideological opinion in the news if they know that a viewer can simply switch channels if they desire. Alterman also points out that a real benefit of the audience participation and call-in programs is that debate of a kind not even imagined in the Arab world before Al Jazeera is transmitted uncensored throughout the Middle East. He does caution, however, that it is critical that these formats avoid simply confrontation for confrontation’s sake, and instead ensure that they are forums for informed debate.
An interesting issue that Schleifer also raises is the coverage of elections by two of the most-watched Arabic broadcasters, Al Jazeera and Al Arabia, including the 2004 US Presidential election, the Palestinian Presidential and local elections of 2005, and the Iraqi elections of 2005. Not only did the coverage of those elections expose vast audiences in the Middle East to different kinds of democratic systems through programs that explained political and electoral processes, representation systems, and vote tallying, but in the case of the Palestinian elections they also demonstrated how an electorate might react to corruption in government and ineffective political leadership. Whether the average Arab viewer internalized a majority of what was broadcast is a matter of discussion, but the point is that he or she was exposed to the real practice of democratic systems, processes that were only a vague foreign concept just a decade ago due to the inadequacy of available information and its manipulation by state-dominated media outlets.

Another way in which Arabic satellite broadcasting and Al Jazeera in particular have affected the political situation in the Middle East is to act as proxies of political parties. Kai Hafez argues, “Their function…is not just objective and balanced reporting but also, at least partly, to take over tasks that are usually fulfilled by political parties. To articulate the people’s will and be able to mobilize for political activism and change is part of the fascination of Arab satellite broadcasting…In taking over the role of mediators between state and society, the media’s democratic agenda could eventually lead to mobilization and a democratic system change.”

Essentially Hafez is arguing that it is possible for Al Jazeera and the other satellite broadcasters to affect change in the political systems of the Arab world, but only if there is a conscious effort to contribute to informed debate and to represent the interests and opinion of society that go unrepresented or are suppressed in an authoritarian context. He cautions, however, that media cannot provide the same integrative and advocacy functions of political parties, especially if constrained by the need to generate revenue to support operations. Furthermore if the talk shows, interviews and debates on Al Jazeera and other Arab satellite networks only provide forums in which people are able to express their opinions and ‘blow off steam’, there is the potential for that to be counterproductive. In that sense openness can inhibit real change by preventing a critical mass of public pressure from developing that would organize and agitate for reform. As Hafez says, “TV talk is useless if the agenda is not conveyed into action. Arab satellite broadcasting will remain ineffective if the movements, organizations and institutions of a democratic body politic do not develop…Channels must be aware that there is a difference between raising awareness and making change.” Given the questionable prospects for political party development even in the more open political systems in the Middle East in the near term, Hafez’s concerns are of particular importance.
Despite the concerns raised about the potential for Al Jazeera and Arab satellite broadcasting to become mere sounding platforms for Arabs to vent their frustrations with their regimes, others argue that the potential force for opening that satellite broadcasting represents is critical to the future of the Arab world. According to Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the Egyptian democracy activist and former political prisoner, “Arab satellites have done probably for the Arab world more than any organized critical movement could have done, in opening up the public space, in giving Arab citizens a newly found opportunity to assert themselves.” These supporters contend that though the potential exists for Arabic satellite programs to be sounding boards, there is an equal potential for such programs to empower Arab audiences to think and express themselves independently and connect with people of similar opinion throughout the Arab world to plant seeds of future liberalization. The fact that Al Jazeera and Qatar are home to the origins of these types of programs puts them at the center of these future developments.

Sheikh Hamad’s Other Initiatives to Differentiate Qatar

Within the first year of his reign, Sheikh Hamad already began to introduce what were comparatively radical liberalizing reforms for a Gulf monarchy, establishing press freedom in the emirate shortly after coming to power. He went a step further by abolishing the Ministry of Information, the government agency responsible for censorship in every country in the region. In its place, Sheikh Hamad created an industry association for all radio and television broadcasting, the General Association for Qatari Radio and Television. Clearly this agency has the potential for exercising some of the same functions of the former Ministry of Information, however since its creation and the establishment of press freedom in Qatar, there have been relatively few incidents of opinion being suppressed by the government. Criticism of the regime is still generally not accepted, however, and individuals practice self-censorship in this regard to avoid any potential retribution.

Continuing his reformist tack, Sheikh Hamad appointed the President of the University of Qatar to head the committee for the development of a Qatari constitution and implemented democratic municipal elections in which women were granted the right to vote at the same time as men and were also permitted to stand for office. In 2003, the Qatari constitution was approved by approximately 96% of voters and it came into effect in June 2005, enshrining Islam as the official religion and shari’a as the main source of legislation, and providing for the separation of executive, legislative and judicial power. Freedom of the press and freedom of assembly were also guaranteed with the stipulation that the latter two must be exercised ‘according to the law.’ Political parties are prohibited, but the emir has promised to hold elections in early 2007 for a 60-member Shura Council, in which 45 members will be directly elected and up
to another 15 appointed by the emir. Though the initiation of participatory reforms in Qatar has lagged behind its neighbors, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, the pace of change under Sheikh Hamad has certainly given reason for significant optimism about Qatar's future government institutions.

The emir's emphasis on education and women's rights has been perhaps even more important than his efforts to expand participatory processes for the development of a Qatari comparative advantage in education and media. During the course of his reign he has advocated for "removing all barriers so that women can realize their full potential in cultural, economic and professional life". A cornerstone of these efforts was the emir's establishment of the Qatar Fund for Education, Science and Community Development in the first year of his reign and his appointment of the second of his three wives, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Misned, as chair of the organization. Sheikha Moza is a UNESCO special envoy for education and has been outspoken about the importance of education for all children, male and female, as well as for restrictions on child labor. She frequently appears alongside the emir, perhaps most famously on the US TV news magazine, 60 Minutes. She is a sought after keynote speaker in her own right and the emir has attended a number of her events, listening attentively in the audience but allowing Sheikha Moza to command the stage, an heretofore unheard of amount of authority and responsibility for the wife of a Gulf monarch. Her official position, responsibilities and influence are absolutely unique for a woman of her position in the region and as such, have very visibly demonstrated the Qatari regime's commitment to women's empowerment both within Qatar and in the region at large.

Identifying a serious unmet demand for quality science and social education facilities in the region in the late 1990s, Sheikha Moza's most important project at the Qatar Foundation has been the establishment of Education City outside of Doha. The project aims to attract leading world education and research institutions to make Qatar the regional leader in these fields, providing a campus in which researchers, students and experts from a variety of fields come together to pursue their work. According to the organization's website, "At Qatar Foundation, we believe that today's investments in education will make Qatar a hub of innovative education and cutting-edge research, ensuring Qatar's prosperity far into the future". To that end, Qatar has funded the establishment of campuses of five American universities at Education City, with majors ranging from petroleum engineering to graphic design. The RAND Corporation in cooperation with the Qatar Foundation has established the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute at Education City, co-chaired by Sheikha Moza, with the goal of providing world-class research and analysis for the government, private sector companies, and regional NGOs for the whole of the Greater Middle East, from North Africa to South Asia. The activities of the Qatar Foundation specifically embrace the challenge of creating a comparative advantage in research and the development of human capital by creating an environment in which the chances for
cross-fertilization of ideas and knowledge spillovers will occur on a regular basis.

Another significant initiative of the Qatar Foundation that has contributed to greater openness and citizen participation has been the creation and sponsorship of “The Doha Debates”. Hosted by veteran BBC journalist Tim Sebastian since the program’s creation in September 2005, The Doha Debates are generally held once a month from September to May from a studio at the Qatar Foundation headquarters in Education City and broadcast on the BBC. The format of the show is an Oxford Union-style debate in which a motion is put to ‘the House’, which is made up primarily of audience members from Qatar and throughout the Arab world, and debated for and against by two experts for each position who also respond to studio audience questions after initial arguments. The audience then votes to pass or reject the motion put to the House. Motions in The Doha Debates have regularly questioned established religious and social norms, leadership of Arab regimes and the role of oil in the political and social life of the region, sometimes with surprising results. A few examples include: passage of the motions that “The House believes that oil has been more of a curse than a blessing for the Middle East” and “The House believes in the separation of mosque and state”, while the motions “The House believes that the War on Terror is a war on Islam” and “The House believes that Arab media needs no lessons in journalism from the West” were rejected. The open forum for debate, directly supported by a government-sponsored organization is unprecedented in the region, and is an indication of the extent to which Sheikh Hamad supports increased debate and participation. What makes the Debates so interesting, according to a regional media expert, is that they are “a real and actual demonstration of where Qatar the country is heading. They are a public expression of the type of country they are trying to build here”.

A number of other initiatives and events have highlighted the Emir’s desire to earn and demand attention for his country that exceeds what one might expect from a tiny country. Under his leadership Qatar has hosted the World Islamic and World Trade Organization Conferences and solicited major sporting events. He also managed to secure a lasting long-term relationship with the United States through the construction of the Al-Udeid Airbase, the largest American air station outside of the US. Sheikh Hamad has been progressive in foreign relations as well, much to the chagrin of his Saudi and other neighbors, through his friendly diplomatic gestures to regional pariahs Israel and Iran. In fact, in the early years of the Second Intifada, Sheikh Hamad even offered to host a peace conference for the Israelis and Palestinians. Though some of the initiatives of the emir and the organizations he sponsors are more visible than others, such as the founding of Al Jazeera and the establishment and population of Education City, it is the culmination of all of the initiatives that perhaps speaks most clearly of the Emir’s commitment to establishing Qatar as a world leader, despite its small size. As Abdallah Schleifer points out, “What’s
particularly relevant for Al Jazeera about all of these emerging signs of financial and political strength is that Qatar is increasingly generating resources – intellectual, cultural and scientific – at a global level of competence that not only did not exist when Al Jazeera opened shop in 1996, but do not exist so significantly anywhere else in the Arab world, including Dubai. Al Jazeera may have drawn attention to Qatar through its coverage of world events and talk shows, but it is the forums, policy conferences, and summits, with keynote speakers ranging from former US President Bill Clinton to the leadership of fundamentalist Islamist organizations (headlining the same conference, by the way) that take Al Jazeera to another level of media coverage beyond contentious, spirited debate to covering world events on a professional stage on par with the giants of international news.

The Future of Al Jazeera

As Al Jazeera enters its second decade of broadcasting, the leadership of the channel has committed itself to professionalism, the establishment of methodical future planning, image shaping, and the primacy of field reporting. To that end it has implemented a formal code of ethics for journalism, a first of its kind in the Arab media. The leadership aims to more scientifically gauge audience preferences and opinion in order to more accurately inform strategic choices for programming, while keeping the network’s shows and news reporting grounded in the Arab context. The pursuit of a full range of Al Jazeera channels to complement the already-existing Arabic news and sports channels with a children’s channel beamed from Education City in cooperation with the Qatar Foundation, a documentary channel and perhaps most famously an English-language news network, Al Jazeera International, seek to move Al Jazeera away from the perception of being a ‘talking head’ network to a full spectrum broadcaster. These efforts are attempting to increase audience appeal and advertiser revenues that up to now have been lacking. According to Wadah Khanfar, managing director of Al Jazeera, the network will aim to “re-introduce the primary importance of field reporting…without which no channel that calls itself a news channel can justify itself, no matter how popular its talk shows.” Al Jazeera sees itself as a global broadcaster and is attempting to put structure and programming in place that will put it in position to compete with CNN and the BBC World Service. Al Jazeera International, due to launch sometime in the summer of 2006 after a number of delays, is the culmination of these efforts, an English-language news network originating not in Europe or North America, but in the Middle East, and targeting an audience that prefers news from a non-Western perspective but in an internationally recognized language. The two critical elements of Al Jazeera’s potential future success and its ability to extend its own reach and that of its host country will be winning an audience for and advertising its new broadcasts.
Conclusion

As Al Jazeera and Qatar continue to take bold steps in increasingly competitive environments, it is certain that the fate and success of the two are closely tied together. As Abdallah Schleifer says, “Qatar’s almost stealth-like movements from strength to strength are reflected in the complex mix of its subtle and effective politics, much of which plays off the presence of Al Jazeera.” Whether Al Jazeera indeed put Qatar on the map as some argue, or vice versa, perhaps matters little. The first decade of Sheikh Hamad’s rule and Al Jazeera’s broadcasts have taken a relatively little-known Gulf country and made it into a major power player in its region with the potential to effectively and meaningfully contribute to regional economic life, conflict resolution processes and political liberalization. Qatar’s economic resources are unquestionably up to the task. Al Jazeera’s leadership is fully capable of effectively implementing the Code of Ethics and strategic ideas it articulated in 2004. Sheikh Hamad through his major reforms of the last eleven years has demonstrated that he not only has the boldness and confidence to challenge the status quo in the Gulf, but also that he has the drive and commitment to see them through. If the establishment of Al Jazeera International meets the high expectations set for it, and if Sheikh Hamad’s reform and development efforts continue, Qatar will outpace its neighbors with its comparative advantage in human capital development and media expertise and become one of the leaders in the world economy in those areas in the long term.

John Williams is currently completing his Master degree at Johns Hopkins.
NOTES

1 A widely accepted estimate for Al Jazeera’s viewership. No formal viewership research has been conducted to determine a more accurate estimate to date.


6 Miles, Hugh. pp. 30-1.

7 El-Nawawy, Mohammed and Adel Iskandar. pp. 32-3.

8 The reasons behind the inability of Qatar to generate sufficient advertising and other revenue to cover its operating expenses are beyond the scope of this paper, however the channel has expressed interest in separating itself from the Qatari government financially to avoid the perception that coverage is extensively influenced. Meanwhile Al Jazeera maintains that support from the emir is no different than the system in which the BBC operates.

9 El-Newawy and Iskandar, p. 29 and Miles, Hugh, p. 38.

10 Miles, Hugh. p. 39.


12 Miles, Hugh. p. 135.

13 Ibid, p. 323.


16 Hafez, Kai. “Arab Satellite Broadcasting: An Alternative to Political Parties?” Cambridge Arab Media Project: The Media and Political Change in the Arab
Political parties are illegal, even in relatively more liberal societies like Qatar, due in part to an widely-accepted interpretation of Islamic law and precedent that views political parties as forbidden because of their potential for divisiveness in society.


Al-Nawawy, Mohammed and Adel Iskandar. 2002, p. 35.


El-Nawawy and Iskandar, p. 37.


These include: Weill-Cornell Medical College, Carnegie Mellon’s Qatar campus for business and computer science, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Texas A&M’s chemical, electrical, mechanical and petroleum engineering program, and the Virginia Commonwealth School of the Arts in Qatar.

Schleifer, Fall/Winter 2004.


Ibid.


SOURCES


