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Al Jazeera, Regional Politics and the Public Sphere

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The Politics of Al Jazeera or the Diplomacy of Doha

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When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or Israel, among other countries, complains to the British Foreign Office about the content of a particular BBC program, the answer is invariably the same: the government of Her Majesty cannot intervene in the editorial policy of the BBC, the independence of which is provided for by the law. As a matter of fact, the Iraqi crisis, and most notably the Kelly affair, has amply demonstrated that the British government itself is not immune from this editorial independence. This was the case not only with Tony Blair during the Third Gulf War but also with Margaret Thatcher during the Falklands War. Still, the Saudi government, which was not successful in dissuading British public television from airing *Death of a Princess* in the early 1980s,[1] thus triggering a series of diplomatic crises between London and Riyadh, keeps complaining to Whitehall about the BBC's portrayal of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and demands the taming of the recalcitrant channel.

The same scenario seems to recur in the case of Qatar and Al Jazeera: each time a government complains about a particular program on Al Jazeera, Qatar consistently maintains that it cannot interfere because of the editorial independence of the channel. However, such a position is usually met with a general skepticism equally on the part of Arab governments and American officials. Unlike Great Britain, Qatar is not known for its democratic tradition, nor does it have a long history of free press. Not surprisingly, Al Jazeera has caused innumerable diplomatic crises.

Does Al Jazeera operate according to strictly journalistic criteria independently of Qatar? Or is it a subservient instrument of its diplomacy? Though seemingly contradictory, these two claims are not irreconcilable. While in the long run Al Jazeera serves the diplomatic interests of Qatar well, in the short run the channel's freedom and jarring tone often complicate the task of the diplomats of this small emirate.

THE GEO-POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS OF QATAR

In order to adequately assess the impact of Al Jazeera and to fully understand the ensuing changes in Qatar's relationship with its neighbors and, more generally, how it positions itself in the Middle East region, it is useful to highlight the main characteristics of this small country which did not gain its independence until 1971, as is the case with Bahrain and the Unites Arab Emirates. In terms of both its image and its regional status, Qatar has come a long way; what it has managed to achieve in a relatively short period of time is quite impressive. In 1995, when the sitting Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani ousted his father, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani, the country was perceived as a discrete satellite of Saudi Arabia.

With some 700,000 inhabitants, about 150,000 of whom are Qatari nationals, Qatar is the archetype of an oil monarchy with plenty of oil and a few locals living to a great extent on oil revenues. More importantly, Qatar is fortunate to be sitting on one of the largest gas reserves, discovered around the same time as the country's ascension to independence. Qatar has indeed the third largest gas reserve in the world.[2] While oil is expected to dry out in the course of the twenty-first century, gas is expected to provide Qatar with resources well beyond that. The problem, however, is that a large part of that reserve is offshore, reaching as far as the disputed zones that are contiguous with Bahrain and extending to the heart of the Persian Gulf, way beyond the maritime borders with Iran. These geological complexities rekindled the dispute dating back to the 1930s between Bahrain and Qatar over territorial sovereignty. They also prompted the latter to adopt a non-confrontational approach with Iran, which guarantees it the continuing exploitation of gas in the North Dome regardless of the tensions that may erupt between Iran and its neighbors or Iran and the United States.

At the heart of the dispute between Qatar and Bahrain is an old rivalry between two dynasties: the Al Thani of Qatar and the Al Khalifa of Bahrain. Partly because of the rivalry, the project of a large federation of emirates, which the British envisaged before their departure from the Gulf in 1971, failed to materialize. While the UAE opted for a federal system, Bahrain and Qatar decided to go their own way. The dispute over the isles of Hawar and the Fasht al Dibel rocks, which came close to degenerating into a military confrontation in 1986, paralyzed the activities of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) between 1987 and 2001, to the extent that in

December 1990, during the summit which took place in Doha some three weeks prior to Operation Desert Storm which followed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, a great deal of the debates revolved around the territorial dispute between Qatar and Bahrain.

Finally, one should not fail to note a significant characteristic of the Qatari identity. Like the majority of the Saudis, the native population of Qatar is Muslim Sunni following Wahhabi precepts which are rigorous and austere to say the least.

Overall, the Qatar which Sheikh Khalifa handed over—albeit involuntarily—to his son is the most discrete student of the GCC class. The only diplomatic fantasy it has probably allowed itself is to be Francophile rather than Anglophile. Nonetheless, this Qatar—the loyal little brother of Saudi Arabia who is also jealous of Bahrain—came to understand the value of maintaining good relations with Tehran. Qatar's politics have always been inextricably linked to these geo-political constraints.

However, the ascension to power of Sheikh Hamad was a turning point for Qatar. With the help of his close circle, most notably the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, the Emir would make out of the pulls and contradictions that characterize the dynamics at play in Qatar the official policy of this emirate.

Qatar's ability to turn its weaknesses into strengths predates the reign of Sheikh Hamad. In spite of its low profile, Qatar was not to be underestimated, particularly when it came to its powerful neighbor Saudi Arabia. In 1974, the United Arab Emirates ceded to Saudi Arabia a portion of a territory that is adjacent to Qatar. Since then, Saudi Arabia has laid claim to a strip situated between the UAE and Qatar. During Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Saudi Arabia requested permission from Qatar to deploy its forces on Qatari soil. Taking a cautious stand, Qatar denied Saudi forces access. To further assert its sovereignty on this fairly ill-defined zone, Qatar set up the Khafous frontier post. For its part, Saudi Arabia, which was building a naval base on Khor Obeid, enforced strict customs control on vehicles using the coastal highway which links Abu Dhabi and Qatar. Eventually, Saudi Arabia restricted access to this road, compelling vehicles to make a detour through Saudi territory and stepping up vexatious controls. To express its discontent to Riyadh, Qatar started flirting with Iran. By the end of 1991 and throughout 1992, Iranian ministers flocked to Doha while members of the Qatari government were dispatched to Tehran. The two countries even started to tease out the possibility for security and defense cooperation. As if this

were not enough, Qatar sent back its ambassador to Iraq. If the purpose behind such moves was to irritate the Saudis, then Qatar can be said to have succeeded in its endeavors, for in Riyadh, the perception was that Qatar had become the Trojan horse of Iran. Throughout the Gulf, Qatar's diplomacy started to worry even those who do not have much sympathy for Saudi Arabia.

Such then is the background against which the Khafous frontier post incident took place on September 30, 1992, incurring two deaths (three according to Saudi sources). Certainly this was not the first incident in the region. However, and much to the surprise of the Saudis, Qatar gave it considerable publicity and even accused the Saudi forces of violating its territorial sovereignty and of penetrating a few kilometers into its territory. Soon thereafter, Qatar suspended its frontier agreements which go back to 1965—a move which was supported by Iran and Iraq. Qatar also decided to boycott future GCC meetings. Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani made it clear that he intended to boycott the meeting of Abu Dhabi at the end of December.

However, on the eve of the summit, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak managed to get King Fahd and Sheikh Khalifa to iron out their differences, thus enabling the summit to go on as scheduled. "Even if the younger party is at fault," an Emirati diplomat pointed out, "it is up to big brother to make concessions." However, for Saudi Arabia, the concession it made was not without strings attached to it: Qatar had to stop behaving as if it were a country that is independent of its big neighbor. The then Crown Prince of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, flew to Riyadh, knowing full well what was awaiting him.[3] Obviously, the lesson that Sheikh Hamad retained is not the one the Saudis had in mind. To the contrary, the Khafous incident had plainly convinced him that, with strong determination, it was possible to bend this powerful neighbor by virtue of the very disproportion of forces evoked above by the Emirati diplomat—namely, imposing the will of the weak on the strong.

Not long after his ascension to power, Sheikh Hamad sought to level the playing field in almost all political spheres. On the diplomatic front, the tension with Bahrain acquired a new dimension with Qatar taking the case to the International Court of Justice in the Hague. Having taken a hard-line approach when serving as Crown Prince and Minister of Defense, Sheikh Hamad was not all that lenient with Bahrain. As a ruler, though, he adopted a more

diplomatic approach. At the same time, he exercised some public pressure in his relationship with some of the GCC members, allowing, for instance, Bahraini opposition figures, including a Bahraini Air Force pilot who was granted political asylum in Qatar, to convey their views on national TV. In a way, these practices seem to prefigure the editorial policy of Al Jazeera. Paradoxically enough, the ascension to power in Bahrain of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa—who, as Crown Prince and Commander-in-Chief of the BDF, was firm in dealing with Qatar—helped break the deadlock. The relationship between the two countries stabilized with Solomon's judgment which the International Court of Justice pronounced on March 16, 2001 and which, by means of a *tour de force*, managed to satisfy both parties.

A close reading of Qatar's actions since 1992 and of the Khafous incident reveals a certain consistency in Qatar's diplomacy: doing everything possible to distinguish itself from its Saudi neighbor. This can be seen not only in Qatar's decision to resume diplomatic ties with Iraq, its rapprochement with Iran and its *de facto* normalization of relations with Israel, but also in its position vis-à-vis the civil war in Yemen—Qatar being the only country which took sides with the North, preventing the foreign ministers of the GCC countries from officially recognizing the separatist Southern government during their extraordinary meeting in Abha (June 4–5, 1994). After the coup d'état, Qatar did not miss the opportunity to boast that its position on the question of Yemen was what spared the GCC the humiliation of finding itself on the side of the loser.

Domestically, Qatar adopted a constitution which guarantees civil liberty as well as religious freedom. For example, the Emir authorized the construction of churches which up to then had been forbidden in Qatar and are still forbidden in the neighboring Wahhabi Kingdom. Another initiative taken by the Emir, in fact one which earned Qatar much praise from the Occident in general and the United States in particular, was to abolish the Ministry of Information and to repeal censorship. However, the new measures do not necessarily mean that journalists can write whatever they want. The main difference is that now, instead of knowing with certitude where the red lines are drawn, they have to guess. In practice, the banning of censorship has even proven to be a real headache for local journalists who are no longer sure where to draw the line.

In November 1996, a year and a half after the coup d'état, Qatar's policy of media openness culminated in the launching of Al Jazeera,

a private satellite channel made possible by a generous 500 million Riyal loan from the state to be repaid over five years.

AL JAZEERA AND THE POLITICS OF QATAR

The Arab World

It is probable that the initiators of this media venture might have thought that, in time, it would be possible to attract investors who would be willing to finance the channel after its formative years. However, the five years have already lapsed without any business plan materializing. As it is, Al Jazeera is still subsidized. Part of the problem is the boycott campaign launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with Arab advertising agencies. Nevertheless, Al Jazeera's "private" model is not without a precedent—Radio Monte Carlo Moyen Orient (RMC-MO), which emerged in the mid 1970s at the French government's behest. Soon thereafter, President Pompidou split ORTF, the public organism of French Radio and Television. Accordingly, Arabic programs were made independent of the foreign programs in the public service, and a subsidiary of Radio Monte Carlo, a private commercial radio beamed out of Monaco, was set up to transmit its programs in Arabic from Cyprus. Overnight, the dynamic, free and modern tone, which was derived from European commercial radio, captured Arab audiences who started to abandon the propaganda-ridden state radio. The presence of advertising was reassuring because of the perception that commercial radio cannot be at the service of the state. This was indeed a shrewd initiative on the part of the French. Behind the fig leaf of commercial radio was a station financed by Sofirad, a holding which was fully owned by the French state and whose directors were nominated by the French president. Ironically, Arab listeners and often decision-makers were unknowingly tuning in to French state radio.

Other models come to mind. For instance, CNN is a private television network, but one which is informed by an American vision of the world. Likewise, Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), which was launched in 1991 in the aftermath of the Second Gulf War with Saudi capital, was conceived as the first Arab information channel and in fact wanted to be the CNN of the Arab world. However, with the launching of Al Jazeera in 1996 came the realization that the Arab world had never experienced something like that before either in television (as MBC's name is associated with

Saudi Arabia) or in radio (as RMC-MO had never dared to break a number of taboos which were in vigor in the Arab and Muslim world in the way Al Jazeera did). The margin of freedom Al Jazeera has enjoyed is such that no Arab government is immune from the channel's on-the-air criticism. The only exception is probably Qatar itself. By and large, Al Jazeera has a very skimpy coverage of its host country. For some, the channel's quasi-inexistent coverage of Qatar's affairs is a sign of independence since Al Jazeera spares the viewers long reports on the daily activities of the Emir of Qatar, which is a real change from what is usually aired on the overwhelming majority of Arab TV channels, including satellite channels. Others see in this "double standard" the price Al Jazeera has to pay for the freedom it enjoys. There is probably a bit of both. Although contradictory, these two views are not mutually exclusive.

Much like Bahrain, which built its reputation after gaining its independence by developing offshore banking, with financial institutions trading throughout the region but not within Bahrain itself, Qatar decided to set up offshore TV. The results were spectacular to say the least. For one thing, there was a huge market for such a venture. State TV had no credibility and was usually seen as an extension of the regimes in place. As for satellite channels, the Egyptian ones were uninteresting, MBC was too dependent on funding from Saudi Arabia which had a conservative approach to the news, while the Lebanese channels were too Lebanese.

Qatar knew how to market itself. Al Jazeera has become the symbol of the emirate as well as the source of its fame. In a sense, Al Jazeera is for Qatar what the casinos are for Monaco. Having in the past been ignored and even despised as a state by other Arab countries, Qatar has at last found a place for itself. In the eyes of Sheikh Hamad who wants his small emirate to be promoted to the major leagues,[4] Al Jazeera instantly found its place in the panoply of instruments designed to achieve such an objective. Sheikh Hamad, who does not miss the opportunity to shock the other heads of state either by walking away from a Gulf summit or by threatening to boycott another, knows how to play the game. The Emir's tendency to raise the stakes in order to gain a better bargaining position is far from being a matter of whim; to the contrary, it is a deliberate and well thought out strategy. In the beginning, the target was Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In some instances, heads of state like President Mubarak and Sultan Qabous of Oman offered to mediate. Soon though, even those leaders who tolerated the "whims" of the new

Emir came to realize that no Arab regime is immune from the initiatives of his satellite channel. Except for Qatari dissidents, dissidents of all sorts are welcome in the studios of Al Jazeera. The channel has provided them with a platform they never dreamed of. In 1998, Saddam Hussein was quick to understand the value of granting exclusive interviews to a channel that is viewed by some 35 million Arab viewers.

Not surprisingly, Al Jazeera has angered many Arab governments. During the GCC summit which was held in Muscat in 2001, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah strongly criticized the Qatari channel and accused it "of being a disgrace to the GCC countries, of defaming the members of the Saudi Royal family, of threatening the stability of the Arab world and of encouraging terrorism."[5] In 1998, Jordan closed down the Al Jazeera bureau in Amman for six months only to come up against another crisis in 2002. Similar scenarios took place in Kuwait, Algeria and Egypt, among Arab countries. In one way or another, most if not all Arab states have at some point complained about Al Jazeera or criticized Sheikh Hamad for his complacency. In 2002, Saudi Arabia recalled its ambassador in Qatar. However, thanks to the unfailing support of authorities in Doha, the management of the channel is so far holding out fairly well and looking forward to better days. The demand for Al Jazeera is such that few if any Arab governments seem to be capable of keeping the channel at bay. In the meantime, the government of Qatar looks the other way, claiming unconvincingly its disapproval of a particular controversial episode of a program while pursuing its hands-off policy.

Still, there is some merit to Qatar's rationale for refusing to interfere. Al Jazeera is not a mouthpiece for the diplomacy of Qatar; at the same time, it is not at odds with it either. Qatar plays on this ambiguity. At first sight, one may characterize the foreign policy of Qatar as being the opposite of that of Oman. Under Sultan Qabous, Oman has followed a political line that is linear, steady, smooth and unambiguous both in the short and long term. In contrast, one gets a sense that Sheikh Hamad has opted for an approach that is chaotic, unorganized and at times ambiguous. But this is only an impression. When seen in retrospect, the Emir's actions reveal constants in the politics of Qatar that have apparently been influenced by the Omani model: maintaining good relations with the United States, Iraq and Iran no matter what happens and establishing significant relations with Israel.

Israel

The case of Israel warrants more than cursory attention. No sooner had the Oslo Accords been signed than Qatar started to capitalize on the new dynamics in the Middle East. As early as 1994, Qatar acknowledged entering into official negotiations with Israel to provide the Hebrew state with natural gas. The deal in question pertains to a feasibility study that may be worth $1 billion. This project is only one small part of a mega project which Qatar is developing to become the principal provider of gas in Europe, including Turkey. However, in light of strong reservations from such Arab states as Saudi Arabia (as the pipeline is supposed to traverse its territory) and Egypt (which finds its revenues from the Suez Canal jeopardized) and in light of the derailment of the peace process, the authorities in Doha have tempered their zeal without necessarily giving up their project. In October 1995, the new Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, met in New York with his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres. In September 1996, an Israeli trade office was established in Doha. In 1997, because of the participation of Israel, Syria and Egypt boycotted the US-backed Fourth Middle East and North Africa Economic Summit. In spite of such reactions, Qatar held out as it did later in the Islamic Conference Organization Summit in November 2000. Officially, Qatar claimed that it closed down the Israeli trade office in 2000, just before the Summit which Iran and Saudi Arabia threatened to boycott if the Israeli office were to remain operative. In practice, however, the two Israeli diplomats at the office did not leave Doha; they were operating from inside their hotel suite. The eccentricity of Qatar manifested itself further in the encounter between the Qatari and Israeli ministers of foreign affairs, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim and Shimon Peres, in Paris in July 2002 in spite of the decision of Arab states to freeze political ties with Israel because of the latter's violent repression of the Palestinian intifada. More recently, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim met once again with his Israeli counterpart—this time Silvan Shalom—in Paris on May 14, 2003. In this last encounter, Sheikh Hamad indicated his willingness "to seriously consider the possibility of increasing the level of diplomatic relations."[6]

In this context, one can understand how Al Jazeera's Ramallah office has been relatively spared the muzzle of Israeli authorities in spite of its intensive coverage of the clashes between the Israelis and the Palestinians, its unabashed broadcasting of the rawest images of

the conflict, its around-the-clock airing of images of Palestinian victims and its transmitting of recorded video messages of so-called suicide bombers. For doing much less than this, other foreign TV agencies have suffered from Israeli censorship as is the case with Abu Dhabi TV which saw its accreditation revoked. It is true that the head of the Al Jazeera office, Walid Al Omari, is an Israeli citizen, but this detail hardly explains the leniency with which he has been treated, especially considering that his coverage of the conflict has been consistently and undeniably pro-Palestinian.

Equally telling is the way Al Jazeera has broken another taboo among Arab media by regularly inviting Israeli officials to express themselves live. The Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, was invited to speak live on Al Jazeera on the eve of the Arab Summit held in Beirut in March 2002. However, the interview was canceled *in extremis* when the Al Jazeera crew was already in place in the office of the Prime Minister. Yielding to the pressures and added exigencies of some of his advisors—who were in principle against such a live appearance—not to take questions from Mohamed Krichene, Al Jazeera's anchor in the Doha studios, Sharon withdrew.[7] Could Israel's relative "tolerance" of a channel that incites particularly the Palestinians but the Arabs in general against Israel be the reward for the open diplomacy of Doha toward Israel? Or does it emanate out of the consideration that Al Jazeera, while hostile to Israel, is also the latter's only conduit to Arab public opinion? It is probably a bit of both, for although Al Jazeera was not originally designed to be a means of communication between the Arabs and the Israelis, the "media normalization" it has adopted—that is, inviting Israelis to appear in a space which previously was completely closed off to them—becomes a *de facto* form of communication between the Arab world and Israel. From the latter's standpoint, Al Jazeera's overt anti-Israeli rhetoric makes it an even more effective means of communication as it pulls the rug from underneath those who accuse the channel of being "a tool in the hands of the Zionists."

The United States

In February 2003, at the end of Organization of the Islamic Conference Summit which was held in Doha, even as Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim—the head of Qatari diplomacy and the spokesman of the summit—was reading the final communiqué which called on the member states to refrain from any action which may "affect the integrity and unity of the Iraqi territory," thousands of US troops

stepped up their preparation in the bases of Al Odeid and As Sayliyah a few miles away with the active cooperation of Qatar. The latter has a defense treaty with the United States which goes back to 1992. Although in the mid 1990s there were only a few troops stationed in Qatar, at the turn of the century, the country became—with the exception of the Philippines—the most important base for the US outside its national territory. Al Odeid military base was built in 1996. Four years later, Qatar invited to the US to make use of it—an offer the latter could not resist after the September 11 attacks. With an eye on the air campaign against Afghanistan, the Americans started to operate from Al Odeid as early as September 29, 2001. In the meantime, the runway was extended to 4,500 meters, making it one of the longest in the world. Work on As Sayliyah ended in August 2002 and the base was used for US Central Command during the preparation for the invasion of Iraq in early 2003.

To fully understand the degree of Qatar's cooperation with the United States, it is useful to consider the circumstances of the family coup d'état which brought Sheikh Hamad to the throne in June 1995. There are speculations that the American authorities gave their blessing to this non-violent succession. It is worth noting that, in his book on the ambiguous relationships between the United States and Saudi Arabia, former CIA agent Robert Baer makes reference to a prominent member of the inner circle of the then Crown Prince with excellent ties with Washington, pointing out on more than one occasion, the amazing ease with which this figure had access to the White House, even without appointment, which suggests an uncommon familiarity with key decision-makers in the United States.[8]

There is no hard proof to substantiate the speculation that the changes in Qatar were backed by the Americans. What is established though is the swiftness with which Washington recognized the new government, outdoing everybody else, including the Gulf states. Equally noteworthy is the amount of praise the Americans have heaped on Qatar since 1995, which is all the more surprising given that the new Emir has chosen to maintain normal relations with Iran and Iraq—two states which are the object of the politics of "dual containment" the Clinton administration chose to pursue. What is even more intriguing is Sheikh Hamad's public call to the United States, during his first visit after seizing power, to re-establish ties with Tehran. This odd suggestion, which would have brought down on anybody else scorn from a superpower which is not inclined to take lessons from anybody, was nothing more than an

amusing indulgence for its initiator. Similarly, Qatar's Foreign Minister often does not shy away from contradicting the Americans during press conferences in Doha either on the question of Iraq, the issue of Iran or the Palestinian–Israeli conflict without necessarily reaping the wrath of Washington.

What profoundly irritated the American administration though was Al Jazeera's coverage of the so-called War on Terrorism, and in particular the airing of the bin Laden tapes before, during and after the war in Afghanistan. In the latter case, Al Jazeera's office in Kabul was bombed. Likewise, during the fall of Baghdad, the office of Al Jazeera was the target of an American missile which claimed the life of Tarek Ayyoub, one of Al Jazeera's reporters. As in the case of Kabul two years earlier, the argument of the American officials that Al Jazeera's office was not targeted or deliberately bombed did not sell.

A few months earlier, when Secretary of State Colin Powell asked the Emir of Qatar to tone down his satellite channel, Sheikh Hamad reportedly pointed out that the first amendment of the American Constitution guaranteed the freedom of the press. Behind the scenes, though, a deal seems to have been struck between the US administration and Al Jazeera. Accordingly, the Americans can publicly claim that they know the content of bin Laden tapes before they are aired. Of course, intercepting the satellite feeds would have done the job, but that has not been necessary as the management of Al Jazeera has agreed to communicate to the Americans a copy of such tapes 48 hours before airing them. Furthermore, and since November 2001, Al Jazeera has systematically invited the Americans to comment on the broadcast tapes. In some instances, as was the case with Ambassador Christopher Ross, the guest spoke fluent Arabic. This same channel, which in the eyes of the Occident is often considered a mouthpiece of the Al Qaeda network, has also aired interviews with Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell and Tony Blair among other political figures who, in spite of their extremely busy schedules, have made themselves available to Al Jazeera to address the Arab public.

One should not also fail to note that on April 3, 2003, in the midst of the war, a huge demonstration took place against the US and Israel with the participation of some 10,000 people headed by members of the municipality of Doha and the Advisory Council as well as the famous Egyptian cleric Sheikh Youssef Al Qaradawi who is yet another Al Jazeera star. This demonstration, which evidently was

organized with the blessing of the authorities in Doha and which took place not far away from the US Embassy, was a peaceful event—and for that matter markedly different from the less peaceful demonstration which took place in Bahrain a few days later.

In spite of the apparent eccentricity of a government which gives an outlet to those who wish to criticize the United States—in fact, the very country Qatar strives to be its best ally—Washington has nothing to complain about when it comes to Doha. Surprising as Qatar's pursuit of a "politics of extremes" may be, the only signs of loyalty which matter are acts, and where these are concerned Sheikh Hamad has abundantly proven the extent of his loyalty to the US since his ascension to power. The outcome is a real political stability in this small emirate. Regionally, the American umbrella is a positive and encouraging sign for Qatar's economic partners. Suffice it here to note that the contracts for supplying natural gas which Qatar signed with Japan, India, South Korea and some European countries are long-term contracts, often extending to 25 years. American protection makes Qatar all the more attractive for companies specializing in country risk assessment and forecast. Eventually, such a stability could appeal even to a big energy consumer like the US itself.

A VOLUNTARY BUT CONTROLLED DEMOCRACY

Internally, Sheikh Hamad's initiative to start a democratization process even before his society demands it goes also a long way toward enhancing the stability of his regime. Thus on April 29, 2003, the same day US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced in Saudi Arabia the planned departure of US forces from the Kingdom before the end of the year, Qatar—where these same forces were to be relocated—adopted by means of a referendum a constitution which makes the emirate a parliamentary monarchy. This text guarantees fundamental public liberties, the independence of judiciary power and the freedom of the press. It also introduces a form of *habeas corpus* and fixes the responsibilities of the executive and legislative branches. The latter is made up of elected representatives through universal suffrage, with the participation of women both as voters and as candidates.[9] In its letter and spirit, the constitution comes to complement the openness that started with the holding of municipal elections in 1999. One can of course question the effective implementation of the new constitutional dispositions.

Still, it is hard to deny that Qatar has embarked on a democratization process, the intricacy of which cannot be fully understood independently of regional dynamics. At least three factors contributed to the strategic choice Sheikh Hamad made not long after his ascension to power: the ardent desire to come out of the shadow of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; the disastrous experience of Bahrain, which fell prey to a Shiite uprising quelled by the government between 1994 and 1999 (the year Sheikh Isa passed away); and finally the keenness to please Washington and to answer the call for democratic reform and openness following the liberation of Kuwait in 1991.

Having drawn lessons from the stalemate Bahrain reached as a consequence of pursuing repression without envisaging a political alternative, the new Emir of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, has in turn set his country on a course of democratization. Upon coming to power, he issued a general amnesty to all political prisoners and opposition figures in exile, conducted a nationwide referendum in February 2001, and promulgated an amended constitution in February 2002 which preserves his power privileges as head of state (henceforth king) but at the same time institutes an advisory council which is partly elected through universal suffrage. These changes are in line with a regional version of democracy whereby political parties are in practice banned. Such is the case for instance in Kuwait, a country where women still do not have the right to vote. In the meantime, the Sultan of Oman has advocated, with a slow but steady pace, a slightly open system which promotes the participation of his subjects. As for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, having justified the establishment of a non-elected Advisory Council, it envisages holding municipal elections; it also appears that there is some prospect of electing in the Shura Council in the near future.

A summary of the chronology of reform in the region gives an idea about the interaction between Gulf societies and the ongoing process of democratization which the region has apparently embarked on: municipal elections in Bahrain in May 2002, followed by legislative elections; legislative elections in Kuwait in July 2003; elections of the Advisory Council in Oman in October 2003; and after the new Qatari constitution was approved by a referendum in April 2003, it was announced that legislative elections would take place in 2005.

While outlining this process of democratization, one should not lose sight of the specificity of each case. Civil society in Kuwait and

Bahrain is very demanding when it comes to real political participation. In Oman, Sultan Qabous, who has drawn lessons from the War of Dhafar, has taken some initiatives. In the United Arab Emirates, the demand is almost inexistent and so is the political initiative of the governments. In Qatar, the Emir has repeatedly explained that he is taking initiatives before social pressure impels him to do so. The effect of this regional contagion and the overlapping of the timing for political reform are hard to ignore. Each step influences and in some instances prompts similar steps in neighboring countries, leading to a virtuous circle which makes the sincerity of the leaders irrelevant in the face of their subjects' growing awareness of their citizenry.

There is no doubt that the programs of Al Jazeera have played an important role in these ongoing changes, particularly the current affairs and *Crossfire* type of programs. The airing of election campaigns in a particular Arab country has an undeniable impact on the viewers of neighboring states. More generally, such programs are contributing to the popularization of political debates and the elimination of walls of censorship in scores of Arab countries.

CONCLUSION

Up until the emergence of Al Jazeera, Arab leaders thought they could consolidate their power by controlling the media. Upon coming to power, Sheikh Hamad did exactly the opposite, and, at least so far, he has not lost his bet. Al Jazeera has in fact made it possible for Qatar to impose itself on the regional scene. It has helped reduce Saudi influence, giving Qatar the opportunity to emerge and, in fact, to become the privileged ally of the Americans in the Gulf, before even Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Now that Sheikh Hamad has fulfilled the objectives he set for his country, a natural temptation would be to consider that Al Jazeera has served its purpose and that the margin of freedom that has been accorded to it since its inception could be gradually reduced. This suggests one way of interpreting the dismissal of the manager of the channel Mohammed Jassim Al Ali who was sidelined after having been the architect of its success for some seven years or so. There is speculation that this measure was taken to please the Americans who were unhappy with Al Jazeera's coverage of the war in Iraq. But even so, the Emir no longer has free rein as his hands are tied with the very success of Al Jazeera. In fact, many channels have

started to emulate Al Jazeera. For instance, Abu Dhabi TV and Al Arabiya (a Saudi-funded channel which broadcasts from Dubai) have adopted, with varying degrees, the professionalism and journalistic aggressiveness which made Al Jazeera a success. Seen from this perspective, taming Al Jazeera can only bring trouble to the Emir of Qatar without significantly receding the margin of freedom that has contributed to its existence.

Another possible reading is that the close alliance with Washington was the original sin of the regime of Sheikh Hamad, which has been forgiven because of the role Al Jazeera has played. Thus, Al Jazeera and the United States can be considered the twin pillars of Qatar's diplomacy, giving the country a lot of room for maneuver while ensuring its security and maintaining its stability. Qatar's rapprochement with the US notwithstanding, Al Jazeera has made it possible for this small Gulf emirate to be taken seriously. What the right hand does is more or less ignored by the left hand. In the final analysis, no one has actually succeeded; nor has anyone failed because each one has derived some form of satisfaction from the situation. As Olfa Lamloum points out, "Al Jazeera is perceived as a stabilizing factor for Qatar in the region. It is both an indicator of democratization and a sign of its uniqueness in the Gulf. Moreover, the Al Jazeera effect is a sort of screen which hides the strategic alliance of the Emirate with the United States."[10]

The foregoing analysis does not in anyway suggest a political schizophrenia; if anything, it is a case of *realpolitik*—and in fact it is this very contradiction which strengthens Qatar's position.

The small one has grown big.

Translated by Mohamed Zayani

NOTES

1 See Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, "The media and democratization in the Middle East: the strange case of television," in Vicky Randall (ed.), *Democratization and the Media* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), p. 189.

2 A recent *Middle East* economic report provides even higher estimates. See Moin A. Siddiqi, "Qatar economic report: the tiny emirate of Qatar is on track to become the Gulf's new super energy power," *Middle East*, No. 332 (March 2003), pp. 46–9.

3 Olivier Da Lage, "Regain d'activisme dans le Golfe: illusoire sécurité collective sans l'Irak et l'Iran," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (February 1993), pp. 4–5.

4 Olivier Da Lage, "La diplomatie de Doha: des yeux plus gros que le ventre," *Arabies* (May 2000), <http://mapage.noos.fr/odalage/autres/qat.html>.
5 AFP dispatch, January 17, 2002. See also Habib Trabelsi, "Crise larvée entre Ryad et Doha," AFP dispatch, July 24, 2002.
6 Fayçal Baatout, "Le Qatar lie des relations avec Israël à des progrès au proche-Orient," AFP dispatch, May 5, 2003. See also "Qatar ready to boost ties with Israel is Mideast peace process accelerates," *Jordan Times* May 16, 2003.
7 Walid Al Omari, Interview with author, September 23, 2003.
8 Robert Baer, *Sleeping with the Devil: How Washington Sold our Soul for Saudi Crude* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), *passim*.
9 For the text and interpretation of the constitution, see *Maghreb-Machrek*, No. 176 (2003).
10 Olfa Lamloum (ed.), *Irak: les médias en guerre* (Paris: Sindbad/Actes Sud, 2003), pp. 199–236.