

SPECIAL REPORT

The Qatar-Gulf crisis

The attack on media freedom and the West's loss of moral authority

Abstract: Four Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia in mid-2017 launched a brazen attack on media freedom by demanding that Qatar shut down the Al Jazeera television network, as part of a list of demands prompted by a diplomatic crisis. The standoff has not ended although the immediate threat to Al Jazeera appears to have abated. The world's media responded to the threat to Al Jazeera by convening in Doha for a conference in July 2017 and by issuing a statement containing recommendations for the protection of freedom of expression.

Keywords: Al Jazeera, freedom of expression, Gulf States, journalism, human rights, media freedom, Qatar, television

JOSEPH M. FERNANDEZ
Curtin University, Perth



Figure 1: Al Jazeera's newsroom in Doha—target of repeated threats by the four-country Saudi Arabia bloc demanding close of the satellite television network.

Introduction

In mid-2017 four Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia severed ties with its neighbour Qatar and imposed a blockade accusing it of, among other things, ‘backing extremism’ (Agencies, 2017, p. 1); and supporting ‘terrorism’ (Al Jazeera News, 2018a). Qatar has repeatedly denied these allegations. The bloc, comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, issued a list of demands and gave Qatar 10 days to comply (Wintour, 2017). The bloc, collectively known as the Anti-Terror Quartet (Al-Jaber, 2018), cut off land, sea and air links to Qatar (*Tribune News Network*, 2017, p. 1). The diplomatic editor of *The Guardian* (UK) called it the Gulf’s ‘worst diplomatic dispute in decades’ (Wintour, 2017). One key demand by the bloc initially was that Qatar close the Al Jazeera media network (*ibid*). The network called the closure demand ‘nothing short than (sic) a siege against the journalistic profession’ and vowed to remain ‘resolute to continue our courageous journalism, reporting frankly, fairly, and truthfully from around the world’ (Al Jazeera News, 2017). Qatar’s National Human Rights Committee also sprang to action and organised an urgent ‘freedom of expression’ conference in collaboration with the International Federation of Journalists, and the International Press Institute. The conference was titled Freedom of Expression, Facing Up to the Threat, and it was held in Doha, Qatar, 24–25 July 2017. Its aim was to support and promote freedom of expression, information access and exchange, among other things. Two hundred participants representing international, regional and national organisations of journalists, human rights and freedom of expression groups, academics, researchers and policy experts attended the event in a strong show of solidarity and to highlight the threats to freedom of expression in the region and globally. The bloc’s assault on Qatar began with a list of 13 specific demands. This transformed into ‘six broad principles’ including demands that Qatar commit to combatting terrorism and extremism and to end acts of provocation and incitement (BBC News, 2017). The blockade entered its seventh month in February 2018 (Al Jazeera News, 2018a). Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani told a major security conference in Munich in 2018 that the crisis ‘manufactured by our neighbours’ was ‘undermining the region’s security and economic outlook’ (Al Jazeera News, 2018b).

Roots of the tension

The roots of the demand for Al Jazeera to close can be traced to the Arab Spring in 2011 (Al Jazeera News, 2017). Diplomatic conflicts in the Arabian Peninsula, however, have a long history (Cherkaoui, 2017, p. 112). The Al Jazeera sore festered again during the Gulf crisis of 2014, when the three Gulf Cooperation Council states—Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—cited Al Jazeera as a grievance (Al-Jaber, 2018). As Cherkaoui observed:

From the time it was launched in 1996, AJ has contributed to energise the Arab public sphere, and has been a perennial irritant for autocratic leaders and dictators in the Middle East. (2017, p. 116)

The ‘ultimate driver of the current crisis’ is said to be ‘Qatar’s insistence on maintaining an independent foreign policy’ (Barakat, 2017). The Al Jazeera network is viewed as a ‘key pillar of Qatar’s foreign policy and soft-power influence among a wider Arab/Muslim audience’ (Al-Jaber, 2018). On another view, the conflict goes beyond the recent boycott and that the roots of the crisis lie in Qatar’s media policies ‘that have, since the launch of the Al Jazeera TV channel, disdained the depth of [the region’s] relationships’ (Toumi, 2017). A key difficulty with the Gulf countries’ demands on Qatar is how countries choose to interpret ‘extremism and terrorism’ and how such an objective can be effectively distinguished from the Qatari view that it accommodates ‘alternative views to the edited, government-approved ones aired by its conservative neighbours’ (BBC News, 2017). A further difficulty, summed up by Dr Khalid Al-Jaber who heads a Washington DC-based Gulf forum, is the view held by the blockading group that Al Jazeera ‘has broken countless rules that media outlets in Arab countries obey’ (Al-Jaber, 2018).

Qatar’s relatively stronger commitment to rights and freedoms has been a thorn in the side of the other Gulf states. That said, however, even established democracies—including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia—have been increasingly facing accusations of undermining freedom of expression. Reporters Without Borders, for instance, has noted that press freedom in the United States ‘has encountered several major obstacles over the past few years’ (Reporters Without Borders, 2017c); while it found the approach in the United Kingdom ‘heavy-handed towards the press—often in the name of national security’ (2017b). The Australian federal government is grappling with severe opposition to a Bill aimed ostensibly at strengthening national security but about which media groups, among others, expressed ‘serious concerns’ because it ‘criminalises all steps of news reporting’ (Joint Media Organisations, 2018).

Doha conference recommendations

The Doha conference ended with a wide-ranging statement addressing media freedom and workers’ rights and concerns, and it condemned the bloc states’ demand for the closure of Al Jazeera and other media outlets including Arabi21, Rassd, Al Araby Al-Jadeed and Middle East Eye (Recommendations, 2017). The statement expressed solidarity with journalists and other media workers at the targeted media. It recognised the ‘numerous resolutions adopted in recent years by the UN General Assembly, the Security Council and the Human Rights Council deploring the impact of attacks against journalists and other media

workers on the public's right to information and freedom of expression'. On media freedoms the statement said:

[The conference] calls on governments to recognise the right of media organisations to report information freely and without interference from government and to allow citizens to access information on their own government and institutions in the cause of transparency and accountability. It also calls on governments to limit their ability to curtail media access and set the limits of reporting and access to information and allow transparent and independent adjudication on decisions relating to publication.

There is an exquisite irony in the demands to Qatar to deal with extremism coming, as it does, from a bloc led by a nation, which itself is widely seen as a key sponsor of international Islamist terror. Saudi Arabia is not alone among the states that have funded and fuelled extremist ideology. According to one FactCheck 'the accusation is common: that the House of Saud is allowing a flow of money to finance ISIS' (Williams, 2017). Saudi Arabia, however, strongly denies such claims. The FactCheck notes, however, that although the House of Saud may not be directly financing terrorists themselves 'there are almost certainly some difficult and worrying questions to answer' (Williams, 2017). Another bloc nation, Egypt, is notorious for its human rights violations and the catalogue is substantial, according to the Human Rights Watch World Report 2017 (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). By mid-June 2017 Egypt had shut down more than 60 websites although some were later allowed back on (Tager, 2017). The UAE 'now imprisons anyone for three to 15 years and imposes a fine of AED 500,000 (US\$136,000) if the person publicly "expresses sympathy, inclination or favouritism toward Qatar"' (Al-Jaber, 2018). Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are imposing increasingly oppressive measures aimed at tightening these three governments' control of language, tone, and expressions in the media (ibid).

Qatar's support for Al Jazeera and others targeted by the bloc have been said to describe the Qatari people's 'desire to have accountable government' and Qataris' tiredness of the autocracy, corruption and repression 'that is the norm in this region' (Fernandez, 2017). Qatar itself does stand as an exception to the region's norm of autocracy, corruption and repression although, according to a leading human rights organisation, Qatar 'has its own reforms to do as well' (Fernandez, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2017b). Qatar's human rights record, however, is far less opprobrious than that of its bloc adversaries who clearly see Qatar and Al Jazeera as a threat to the region's political order.

West's loss of moral authority

Global press freedom indices such as those conducted by Reporters Without

Borders and Freedom House generally place Western liberal democracies higher up in the rankings. For example, the Reporters Without Borders 2017 Press Freedom Rankings shows as follows: Australia ranked number 19; Canada (22); New Zealand (13); the United Kingdom (40); and the United States (43) (Reporters Without Borders, 2017a). The Gulf nations, however, ranked as follows: Bahrain (164); Egypt (161); Qatar (123); Saudi Arabia (168); and United Arab Emirates (119). A similar picture emerges with the Freedom House 2018 rankings where Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US are each ranked as ‘free’, while the five Gulf nations—including Qatar—are each ranked as ‘not free’ (Freedom House, 2018a). Western Liberal democracies have, however, over the years succumbed to legislative tightening of laws that impact adversely on human rights and liberties, in overt and subtle ways that appear to have the tacit endorsement of their own citizens. Consequently, these countries’ moral authority to challenge moves such as the one by the Gulf states against Al Jazeera and other media has been considerably compromised. Freedom House in its 2018 report notes that the United States has ‘retreated from its traditional role as both a champion and an exemplar of democracy amid an accelerating decline in American political rights and civil liberties’ (2018b). Australian journalist Peter Grete who endured a sham trial in Egypt for threatening national security and was held for 400 days observes that the United States—which tended to be viewed as a freedom of expression, human rights and civil liberties beacon—has ‘never quite been able to arrange a perfect marriage of its noble founding principles to its daily practice’ (Grete, 2017, p. 184). Every president ‘standing in a pulpit to lecture other leaders has been rightly accused of hypocrisy’ (Grete, 2017, p. 185). A representative from the US writers’ organisation, PEN, told the Doha conference the country under President Donald Trump was ‘undergoing a new form of assault against the press from senior members of the American government’ (Tager, 2017). Dictators of the world, it has been further said, would be emboldened by Trump’s public display of hostility towards the media (Gerson, 2017). According to Grete, however, the previous administration under Barrack Obama, was ‘the worst’ on issues of national security and press freedom (2017, p. 186). In Australia, legislators without compunction describe concerns about civil liberties as a ‘luxury’ when dealing with anti-terrorism efforts (Gomes, 2017). The state’s national security powers are increasing ‘bit by bit, increment by increment’ (Murphy, 2017).

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Associate Professor Joseph M Fernandez is the discipline leader of Journalism and Communication at Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia. Dr Fernandez is also the Australian correspondent for the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF). He attended the Doha conference on the invitation of Australia's Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and the International Federation of Journalists. J.Fernandez@curtin.edu.au