

Al-Jazeera's Democratizing Role
and the Rise of Arab Public Sphere

Submitted by

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to the University of Exeter

as a thesis for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Politics

in July 2012

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Dedication

To my wife Rachida

and my sons Haytham, Ilyas and Anas

Thank you to my mother and father, who brought me up to be who I am

Abstract

More than sixteen years have passed since the launch of the Qatar-based Al Jazeera news channel. Looking back, the state of Arab media and its relationship with the political sphere was different from what we see nowadays. The launch of Al Jazeera in 1996 was a significant event that led to subsequent changes both in the media and politics. Among these changes, the Arab spring, which started in Tunisia in December 2010, is certainly the most remarkable one. This ongoing event has already resulted in the fall of four dictatorships and is expected to unleash a democratization wave and reshape the face of the Arab region.

This research analyzes the Al Jazeera democratizing effect and looks at the political implications of the new Arab public sphere. In doing so, it seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature, which tends to ignore the Arab world that remains largely under-researched. Contrary to the top-down approach inherent in the dominant narratives on democratization, that pay almost no attention to the growing role of the media in political change, I adopted a bottom-up approach arguing that, particularly in the Arab setting, it has become almost impossible to separate changes in the media landscape from those in the political field. The Arab spring provides us with a telling empirical example where this interplay is remarkably manifest. In this context, Arab democratization is no longer an abstract; it is rather a developing process that needs our attention and requires concerted scholarly efforts.

To develop an original approach to understanding Arab democratization and analyze its complex dynamics, I used grounded theory and its powerful tools in theory building. Based on this theoretical framework I opted for qualitative methodology to elaborate the empirical part of this research, which consists primarily of analyzing and interpreting

in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of Al Jazeera's staff in various managerial and editorial positions.

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