

Nov 04, 2016 by [Lina Khatib](#)

WikiLeaks, Al Jazeera, and the Qatari Public Diplomacy Challenge ^[1]

The latest round of WikiLeaks carried some bad news for Qatari public diplomacy, in the form of US embassy cables stating that the Qatari government is using *Al Jazeera* as a political bargaining tool.

The leaked cables, from 2009, claim that Qatar has offered to stop *Al Jazeera* broadcasts in Egypt in return for Egypt's cooperation in reaching a "settlement for the Palestinians". The cables also state that Qatari-Saudi relations "are generally improving after Qatar toned down criticism of the Saudi royal family on *Al Jazeera*".


The leaks come at a time when Qatar is being criticized for its regression on the media freedom front. The latest *Reporters San Frontières* report ranks Qatar at 112 out of 178 countries on the press freedom scale in 2010 (compared with 73 out of 173 countries in 2008). And Qatar's forthcoming media law—the first such law in 30 years—is causing concern about its potentially contributing to further curbs on freedom of speech and reporting.

Al Jazeera has undeniably played a key role in Qatari public diplomacy. Its efforts to push the boundaries of what can be discussed on Arab television have changed the landscape of the Arab media, and forced Arab regimes to pay attention—and by doing so, Qatar has managed to build an image of a mediator in regional politics, and a champion of freedom of speech. But, it is no secret that since its inception, *Al Jazeera* has engaged in what Marwan Kraidy calls the "anywhere but here" strategy of only criticizing Arab politics outside Qatar. What the cables hint at is a step further in state influence that goes beyond self-censorship of domestic issues coverage. While the US cable sees Qatari-Saudi relations as having improved after a change in *Al Jazeera* reporting (thereby implying some form of causality), it is just as (if not more) likely that the more favorable *Al Jazeera* coverage is a reflection of the recent improvement in the countries' political relationship.

This conclusion appears more plausible when one considers *Al Jazeera's* current reporting on the Egyptian parliamentary elections which started on November 28. The channel is offering virtually no coverage of alleged fraud or hard-hitting criticism of the NDP's curious blanket win. This comes after Mubarak's first ever visit to Qatar on November 26—widely seen as a sign of a Qatari-Egyptian rapprochement—and merits further probing in light of one of the cables' highlighting of a "media war" that had taken place between Qatar and Egypt over the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2009 (and also *Al Jazeera's* enthusiastic reporting on Kefaya back in 2005). The leaked cables lead to speculation on whether this reporting change of heart is a repeat of the Saudi scenario, or whether it is part of a wider political deal between Qatar and Egypt.

Qatar is working hard on its international image, and its efforts paid off on Thursday when FIFA announced that the Gulf state would be hosting the World Cup in 2020—the first Arab

country to do so. It is also opening the Arab Museum of Modern Art on December 30 this year—following the Museum of Islamic Art that opened in 2008—and is host to a sprawling Education City encompassing branches of American universities like Georgetown and Northwestern University (the latter's Qatar campus specializes in degree programs in journalism and communication).

The direction that *Al Jazeera* is taking is a challenge to this image. It is tempting for any regime to have a TV channel at its beck and call, mirroring the regime's likes and dislikes, and serving as an instant political platform (the United States' establishment of al-Hurra is a notable example). However, public opinion polls have shown that audiences are not fooled by such tactics (al-Hurra has had no measurable positive effect on the image of the USA in the Middle East ). The strength of *Al Jazeera* as a public diplomacy tool for Qatar lies in its credibility. If that credibility is called into question, *Al Jazeera* will be perceived as yet another regime mouthpiece among many in the Middle East, and Qatar's hard work would go to waste.
