

(The most watched TV Channel in the Arab world is being targeted by the Anti-Qatar Block)

The thirteen demands placed by the Saudi coalition to Qatar via Kuwait, included the closure of Al Jazeera and publications and websites "directly or indirectly supported by Qatar". Saudi Arabia and its partners demanded that Qatar must shut down the Doha-based al Jazeera channel and the London-based The New Arab Satellite TV Channel "Alaraby Television Network" which broadcast from London.

According to recent media reports; Press freedom and human rights advocates, journalists and social media users have condemned the outrageous demand by the anti-Qatar alliance to shut Al Jazeera network and other media outlets in Qatar and in London.

Even the UN High Commissioner Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini has called the demand by a Saudi-led bloc to close Al Jazeera an "unacceptable attack on the right to freedom of expression and opinion".

Hugh Miles the author of *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World* wrote recently in the Guardian condemned the move: "If Doha capitulates – and there are no signs it will – it will effectively have lost its sovereignty and become a vassal state of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Yet defying the deadline could lead to regime change in Qatar, or even war."

Why they don't like Al Jazeera?

Al Jazeera is the most widely watched Arabic channel, but it has long drawn the ire of Middle East governments for airing sensitive controversial viewpoints. Qatar has previously said it would not negotiate sovereign and internal matters, including al Jazeera, under pressure from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Since it came into existence in 1996 Al Jazeera Arabic Satellite Channel has played a critical

role in shaping public opinion in the Middle East. Not only educating and informing but also provoking controversy and opening up debate on issues considered taboo prior to the era of Al Jazeera. The channel caused a media earthquake and changed the landscape of the Middle East media scene. It had successfully rumbled dictators and shakes regimes. Most Arab dictators have singled out Al Jazeera as the most dangerous enemy. Its broadcast were blocked, offices trashed and its correspondents black-listed or even arrested and imprisoned. Some even complained that Al Jazeera is a foreign policy tool in the hands of the Qatari government. Officially Qatar denied this but no one can deny that Al Jazeera has enhanced the image of Qatar globally and within the Arab world. Generously funded by the government of Qatar, it has done a great job in promoting the concepts of freedom of speech and democracy in the Middle East.

In November 2002, Al Jazeera's office in Kabul, Afghanistan, was destroyed by a US missile. In April 2003, an Al Jazeera journalist died when its Baghdad office was struck during a US bombing campaign. In April 2004 during Tony Blair's visit to Washington, it was revealed that Blair talked ex-President George W Bush out of launching a military strike on Al Jazeera's HQ in Doha Qatar.

To the opponents of free speech the channel is no more than a mouth piece for Islamists. It has given Qatar powerful clout over popular opinion across the Arab world. Many see Al Jazeera as an arm of the Qatari Foreign Ministry. Some believe that during the forthcoming negotiations the detractors may insist that Al Jazeera tones down its political reporting and analysis

A recent FT analysis says: "Since its inception, Al Jazeera has sparked controversy, hosting political dissidents, Islamists, and even Israelis — one of the first Arab channels to do so. It interviewed Osama bin Laden after the 2001 Twin Towers attack, and broadcast messages from al-Qaeda for the rest of the world."

Al Jazeera has been criticised for many reasons. One of which is lack of impartiality and objectivity in covering the unfolding events in Syria and Libya. I argue that this is not the case. For a start, Libya and Syria prevented Al Jazeera's teams from doing their job in covering the mass protests against their dictatorial regimes. Despite that, the Channel has given plenty of space for the pro-regime spokespersons and defenders to have their say and peddle their lies.

Al Jazeera was the first Arabic Channel to invite Israeli politicians and commentators to express their views on political issues during news bulletins and live-shows.

Critics keep saying that Al Jazeera never focused on local issues and never criticized the host regime. This is unfair and untrue. I have seen live discussion programmes in which studio guests expressed disapproval of Qatar for hosting an American military base s at Al Udeid. It invited guests who accused the Station of being a Zionist agent

The coverage of the Arab Spring has been effective, comprehensive and professional. I hear comments that Al Jazeera Arabic is less objective than the more restrained Al Jazeera English. I don't see how you could be objective when you see the Syrian regime shells residential areas, or when you see tanks firing at apartment blocks.

On hearing of the 13 demands I tweeted: "I demand that the BBC, Sky News, Channel4, and Fox News are shut immediately because I don't like some of the stuff they broadcast".

According to the latest statistics, there are over 1200 Satellite TV Stations broadcasting in Arabic of which only 5 or 6 are influential politically; Al Jazeera plus 5.

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**ALJAZEERA**