

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Al Jazeera at Fifteen Years ^[1]

DOHA --- On November 1, the Al Jazeera Network celebrated its 15th birthday with splendor – a party for about a thousand people attended by the Emir of Qatar, the young Yemeni woman who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize, and the mothers of Arab Spring martyrs Khaled Said and Mohammed Bouazizi. The celebration was well deserved; the channel that began broadcasting six hours a day in 1996 has become one of the world's most important media companies.

Prior to the celebration, Al Jazeera's Center for Studies – the network's in-house think tank – organized a two-day conference to discuss Al Jazeera's past, present, and future. This was not the lovefest some might have anticipated. Many Al Jazeera employees participated and made clear that as the network moves forward it must become much more proficient in removing bias and errors from its news content. Those raising these issues included several of Al Jazeera's most prominent on-air figures, and the proceedings were being televised live, which underscored the staff members' determination to make their concerns heard.

Among other topics addressed were the coverage of this year's Arab revolutions, the influence of the network on Arab and global public opinion, how Al Jazeera relates to social media networks, and a wide range of other subjects. Public diplomacy received considerable attention, given that Al Jazeera's creation was a public diplomacy effort by Qatar's rulers to increase international recognition of the country's aspirations in the Arab world and beyond. With great wealth but limited "hard power," Qatar envisioned the Al Jazeera enterprise as a soft power equalizer, enhancing the nation's clout without resorting to the traditional process of building up military strength and then acting in menacing ways.

From its beginning, Al Jazeera reshaped the Arab public sphere by discussing government corruption, the role of women in Arab society, and other matters long ignored by the staid government-run news organizations in the region. The network's effect on its audience was so profound that Al Jazeera's reporting has frequently been met by screams of protest from governments within and outside the region. That is a sign of effective journalism.

Despite its now-established reputation as a media powerhouse, Al Jazeera will face tests during the next few years. One result of the Arab revolutions is the emergence of strong local news organizations in several countries. They are likely to cut into Al Jazeera's viewership, forcing the Qatar station to decide how much it wants to continue to rely on its regional approach to news. In addition to its increasingly popular Al Jazeera English, the network will soon offer new channels in Turkish, Swahili, and Serbo-Croatian – all costly projects with uncertain benefits.

The network has a new leadership team that must face up to these challenges while continuing to define the role and responsibilities of transnational journalism. During the past 15 years, much of the Arab world has come to rely on Al Jazeera to spark political change. As the network expands its global reach, it will be interesting to see whether it can replicate that

influence on a larger stage.
