

## The Rise of Al Jazeera

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**ABSTRACT:** Al Jazeera is likely the most controversial media phenomenon of the last few decades. But say what you will about the goodness or badness of it, its effect is undeniable. Al Jazeera has done what no other media before it could: bring all Arabs together, under one umbrella, to speak their minds.

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### Introduction

The Arab world has always been so terribly far and distant from the Western world, not just geographically speaking (in which respect it is probably closer than most people assume), but also in terms of identity, outlook, culture, reaction and general day to day to life. This in turn has helped to fuel gross misperceptions, generalisations and overall lack of understanding that does not help much in confronting modern day demons of Islamic terrorism and the objectives and focus of a war in the Middle East like the one the United States is currently waging in Iraq.

Because of these blinkers we as the West seem to have on, we tend to forget that at the end of the day, their society is one faced with similar issues we would face if we didn't have certain freedoms, like those of opinion, press and expression. The Middle East in its modern form, and arguably during its entire history, has never been a particularly welcoming place for opinion and opposition. Though this is true of many places, it is ironic that a civilization, in the words of Huntington, would suffer from such a generic case of government oppression and censorship. New media such as print, radio, television, etc, have generally been used to further the objectives of controlling regimes. Saddam Hussein did not allow open criticism in the press, or anywhere really. Egypt owned all media outlets to which its people had access, and these reported largely on the average day of a politician - what meetings he (because there is striking male dominance in Egyptian politics) might have attended, what phone calls he would have received, and other such riveting bits of news. Even things as universal in the Arab world as the commencement of the Haj, Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, which is determined by astrological calculations, were largely delivered by state sponsored media. This means that, if Saudi religious authorities had abruptly announced the start of the Muslim lunar month of Dhu'l Hijja (when the Haj commences) a day before the expected date, it would have been up to the discretion of local broadcasters to inform Hajjis of the change. This did not necessarily happen.

Equally, events in far off Egypt remained, for locals in a Jordanian or Kuwaiti village, far off in Egypt. There existed little if any shared experience for the Arab world as a whole - or at least on a conscious level - other than the greater cultural similarities. The most memorable shared experience in recent times had been the monthly radio concerts of the legendary Um Kalthoum, who, for a brief period in the 1970s united the Arab world on Thursday to listen to her sing. Yes, there existed the shared notions of the Palestinian cause, the shared Islamic identity and perhaps equally the longing for the return of the Golden Era of Islam; however, with regards to actuality and day to day existence, the Arab world was largely fragmented.

Until, that is, Al Jazeera stepped onto the pan-Arabic stage. Oh how Nasser would have enjoyed such a bold Arabic enterprise, except that it might have undermined him with the truth. Al Jazeera, though initially received with some apprehension, represented for the first time a trans-Arabian news network that transcended the state apparatus and delivered into the living rooms of an average Arab family what was going on in their region, even in their country. News became interesting. News became, more than anything, relevant.

This phenomenon, not unlike the “CNN effect” is so much more relevant in the lives of an average Arab, where censorship was a normal occurrence. “CNNification” for the West, meant instant access to events across the globe, in real time. The general effect would be to empower the world with instant information, to the point that public opinion could sway the outcome of a particular event. This effect is classically crystallized in the memory of the Clinton administration’s Somali venture. The US government chose to take unilateral action in a warlord dominated Somalia partially in response to the US public demand after viewing eerie footage on CNN and other news networks. It also, of course, brings events that occur in Indonesia much closer to us, because of what they might represent. The impressive outburst of compassion and eagerness to help the Indian Ocean rim after the Tsunami struck in Dec 2004 was in large part possible because of the instant and extensive character of the media coverage the event received. The rise of international media outlets has undoubtedly changed our world. Our Western world. Indeed, the whole world. The rise of an Arabic news network, though, represented so much more for the Arab world than CNN did in ours. Where we were finally connected as a world, the Middle East and North Africa were finally connected.

In a land where little opportunity for public expression existed, a call-in talk show, so very normal to our Western constructs, seemed like an extraordinary possibility. It meant that Rajah in Casablanca could debate with Salman in Bahrain about what it truly means to be Jordanian. A debate which would normally be avoided boomed out of boxes in a family’s lounge. This meant that a Palestinian family, from Grandmother to children, sitting in a room in Amman could actually question the difference between their identity and what was forced on them, because other people were thinking it, and they now knew it. It lent legitimacy to people’s thoughts and gave them permission to question.

Al Jazeera meant a revolution in thought and identity in the Middle East and amongst the Arab populace at large. It also meant that there was an alternative to biased government broadcasts and largely western-slanted media institutions like the BBC and CNN. This paper

explores the rise of Al Jazeera as a media corporation and the effects it has had on its audience. It considers the effect a corporation can have on a large group of people and the consequences its actions may have for the world at large. With this in mind, we take a look at the reactions on both sides of the Atlantic and within Arab countries, as well as Al Jazeera's effect on international and national relations and policy.

This includes an analysis of reaction to Al Jazeera, including the establishment of a rival news network, Al Arabiyah, and where this currently places Al Jazeera. The paper hopes to understand and explain the history of Al Jazeera in an era when corporations often transcend nationalities. Al Jazeera is a particularly interesting example, because, though financed by a state, it transcends this and affects population, in turn affecting state and regional dynamics. This paper asserts that Al Jazeera is one of the most important corporation developments to have occurred since the end of the Cold War. In addition to this, the paper believes it to be a powerful engine for changing the general dynamics in the region. Ultimately this paper asks whether the rise of Al Jazeera could be as significant in the Middle East as Gutenberg's creation of movable type was in its day.

### **The rise and rise of Al Jazeera**

The world took little note of a Qatari government decree issued one unimportant day in January 1996. The decree established Al Jazeera as an independent television station. And so, on November 1, 1996, Al Jazeera took its first steps toward changing its world (Al Jazeera, 2006: [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

Interestingly, Al Jazeera, a drastically different approach to Middle Eastern satellite television, came about with a Qatari change in regime. Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani had in the previous year staged a bloodless coup against his father in June 1995. With his seizure of power, a wave of liberalism spread across the country. Amongst his early decisions was the creation of the news network to offer uncensored coverage of the events that shaped the region. Other reforms by the enlightened monarch included the abolishment of the Ministry of Information in 1998 and the holding of municipal elections in the following year, with the regional first of extending to women the right of suffrage (Rugh, 2004: 12). Sheik, in the minds of some, embodies "a new generation of Arab leaders more open to political and social ideas familiar to the West" (Rugh, 2004: 16). At any rate, there was certainly a relaxing of governmental controls and impositions with Hamad bin Khalifa. It is within this context that Al Jazeera was born. The chairman of the broadcaster explains the network as part of the greater trends of democratisation and liberalisation of society instigated by the leader. In an interview with Shaikh Hamad bin Thamar al-Thani, the chairman of Al Jazeera, he explained the creation of the network as part of the same trend of Qatari liberation from traditional systems of governance, and with that, oppression (TBS, 2001: [www.tbsjournal.com](http://www.tbsjournal.com)).

Of course this wave of freedom that swept through Qatar was not without its economic motivation. Being one of the world's smallest countries, little attention has ever been paid to the Emirate outside the Middle East. The creation of Al Jazeera served firstly to garner itself

some importance in the region, as well as global recognition. Having the world's third largest natural gas-field, it uses Al Jazeera as a business card of its progressive nature, and thus a place well worth investing in:

Two important factors add to the significance of Qatar's holdings. The first is Qatar's reputation as a place that is highly receptive to foreign investment, unlike Russia or Iran, or for that matter Saudi Arabia, which has the fourth-largest (sic) reserves. Political stability, a clear financial and legal code, and a proven track record of large, unencumbered returns on major investments bolster this point. The Economist, in 2005 survey of the natural gas industry, cited Qatar as a place that puts out a "welcome mat for foreign investors." (Foreign Affairs, 2006: Sponsored section).

The article, sponsored by the Qatari embassy, goes on to explain the success and importance of Al Jazeera;

Long before the internet took root locally, an independent media was not widely embraced by Arab governments. As the Middle East's first independent satellite broadcast network, Al Jazeera frequently angered governments accustomed to censoring information for their citizens at will. (*Foreign Affairs*, 2006: Sponsored section).

Qatar's progressiveness is a call for foreign investment. Al Jazeera is its business card, neatly wrapped in the logo of a corporation with a good effect, even if the intentions are not as pure as one might wish. The Amir of Qatar has effectively placed Qatar on the map. The overall strategy was described by a Qatari official "as the government's instrument of political self-defence in its competition with Saudi Arabia, which indirectly controls MBC, ART, Orbit, and al-Sharq al Awsat" (Rugh, 2004: 19).

This last statement reflects another fact behind the establishment of Al Jazeera; Qatar's thirst to come out of the Saudi shadow. There was a time in Qatari history when the small state was virtually socially and politically indistinguishable from Saudi Arabia (Rugh, 2004: 20). The rise of the Saudi satellite and pan-Arab television caught the eye of the Qataris, and so it seemed like a good place to start to vest absolute independence from Saudi influence.

Al Jazeera's story is one littered with typical anecdotal luck. Though a lot of hard work certainly went into its establishment, it was through extraordinary moments of sheer providence that the station made its biggest leaps. The first of these occurred some four months after the Emir's edict in April. The British Broadcasting Corporation's Arabic experiment, though off to an exciting start, had made a number of mistakes when contracting Orbit, a Saudi owned company, for its satellite needs. It also allowed Orbit to be the owner of all the equipment necessary for this operation. In the end, because the BBC refused to compromise truth and objectivity, refusing to comply with Saudi censorship requests, the plug was pulled on the network, literally, at midnight 20 April,

1996(Richardson, 2006: [www.richardsonmedia.co.uk](http://www.richardsonmedia.co.uk)). Because the BBC didn't own the equipment, they could not simply go to another satellite company. Besides, Saudi financial interests held too much sway for anyone to risk inviting their wrath. Without equipment the BBC trained staff found themselves jobless. Al Jazeera, though, was looking for a staff. Ian Richardson, the former manager of BBC Arabic service comments:

While BBC Arabic Television itself may be dead, its editorial spirit, its style and even its programmes, albeit under different names, live on -- transmitted from the tiny Gulf state of Qatar. (Richardson, 2006: [www.richardsonmedia.co.uk](http://www.richardsonmedia.co.uk)).

The channel was audacious in its quest to concentrate exclusively on news and current events, filling a sorely needed gap. Other Arabic satellite channels were largely entertainment-based and whatever news existed in the Arab world was usually restricted and monitored. Al Jazeera took a risk in its approach because of the potential feather ruffling of the largely autocratic Arabic leadership (TBS, 2001: [www.tbsjournal.com](http://www.tbsjournal.com)). The Qataris took a chance all the same.

Initially, Al Jazeera wanted to focus on Arab and Islamic news. Central to this was the opening of offices in Gaza and Ramallah for starters, and then in Iraq, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. It also can lay claim to the honour of being the only Arab channel with regular correspondents in Israel. As for Iraq, there were very few other networks that had representation. During Operation Desert Fox, when a US led coalition carried out air strikes against Baghdad in December 1998, Al Jazeera was the only news network to cover the event. For Al Jazeera, this was a milestone moment, because it catapulted them into the Arab mind at large and brought them international attention, as many of the Western networks relied on Al Jazeera's coverage for their own reports. Al Jazeera's role echoed that of CNN during the 1991 Gulf War (TBS, 2001: [www.tbsjournal.com](http://www.tbsjournal.com)).

The ensuing period was filled with stellar news moments, including Saddam Hussein's January 1999 Army Day speech in which he called for a general revolt against Arab monarchies. That this message could so easily be beamed into countries across the region, from Jordan to Saudi Arabia, was certainly revolutionary, and Al Jazeera began quickly to overcome initial Arab suspicions (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg. 167).

Arguably though, what truly launched Al Jazeera into the hearts of the Arab world was its coverage of the al Aqsa intifadah, which began in October 2000. Up to this point it had done quite an in-depth coverage of the 1998 election, even interviewing Ehud Barak and Shimon Peres, serving its credibility both in the Arab and Israeli camp. As the intifadah grew, Al Jazeera carried graphic footage of the death and destruction brought upon the Palestinians. This reporting grasped the attention of an ever growing Arab public because it reported on regionally relevant news in Arabic, unlike other networks available. "Al-Jazeera's live, graphic reporting of the bloodshed riveted Arab audiences, prompting a region-wide groundswell of sympathy for the Palestinians," reported *The Economist* (2005: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)).

In the meantime, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan had offered four different news agencies the opportunity to open Kabul offices. Out of CNN, Reuters, AP Television News and Al Jazeera, this last one was the only one to accept the offer. In the meantime, this served Al Jazeera handsomely, as it was the first network to interview Osama bin Laden, and allowed the network exclusive coverage of the Taliban destruction of the massive Buddha statues in March, 2001 ((El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg 149).

Al Jazeera's Kabul office would become its global launching pad following the US bombing of Kabul in retaliation for the events of September 11, 2001. After 9/11 the Taliban had expelled all journalists save for Al Jazeera, so when bombs began to fall over the Afghani capital, the network was ideally positioned for coverage of the American onslaught. Indeed, Al Jazeera was in the middle of a live interview with Mohammed Kicham, a Taliban foreign ministry official. Mohammed Kachim described the event.

While Halimi was speaking, we heard a big noise, like a bomb. Suddenly we had no picture and no sound at all. After about five minutes, the sound came back and Tayseer Allouni (Al Jazeera's Kabul reporter) reported a bomb had fallen nearby. 'I'm sorry,' he told the studio in Doha, 'but the cameraman has disappeared and I've no idea where he is.'" (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg. 52).

It later turned out that he had fallen off the roof. Fortunately the building was not too tall so the cameraman climbed back up and carried on with the show. But of course, as the world's eyes turned towards Afghanistan, Al Jazeera was there to provide the footage. Allouni's reports were not only broadcast on Al Jazeera, but on television networks the world over (Rugh, 2004: pg 24). Coupled with re-broadcasting of Osama interviews and footage, Al Jazeera took centre stage in the world's media. Its calligraphic logo soon became as recognizable as CNN's snake-like curves. It offered the Arab world an Arab perspective on the events that transpired in its field of interest. This did not necessarily go down well with the US, who had sent out a request to media agencies to cut down Osama coverage, as it felt he received too much publicity. Al Jazeera, of course, was not affected by this, at least not its editorial policy. However, on November 13 of 2001, Al Jazeera's Kabul office was hit by US missiles. Whether this was done on purpose is a fact still disputed. The US, of course, claims its "smart-bombing" campaign might not be so smart (Rugh, 2004: pg. 17). This did little to cripple the network. In 1996 it had begun broadcasting for six hours of the day, but success soon allowed it to broadcast 12 hours daily. Since January 1, 1999, it has been a 24 hour service. By the end of 2001, Al Jazeera employed nearly 500 employees, with fifty foreign correspondents, stationed across 31 countries (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg. 163-69).

### **Who watches what on Al Jazeera?**

There are two distinct traits within Al Jazeera that make it stand out. Firstly, it has extensive news coverage in Arabic by reporters who know what will appeal to an Arabic public. Secondly, it has political discussion programs, which delve into very controversial subjects and provide a theatre for disparate opinions. Though other Arabic language services provide similar programming, and have done so before Al Jazeera, the latter has gone further and in

a more news-orientated fashion than the entertainment-based channels (Rugh, 2004: pg. 14). It is reported that Al Jazeera's is the Arab world's most watched newscast (*The Economist*, 2005: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)). As mentioned earlier, the network's coverage of the Al Aqsa Intifada did absolute wonders for its viewership. Footage of the 12-year-old Palestinian school boy, Muhammad al-Durrah, being shot by Israeli soldiers while held in his father's arms reverberated around the Arab world, and the rest of the world, courtesy of the network. The station went on to publish a popular Palestinian song, "Jerusalem shall return to us", which made mention of the boy's name (Rugh, 2004; pg. 229). This presentation brought the reality of Arab brethren into the living rooms of the region, much more accessible and appealing than the clinical Western coverage, often framed to satisfy Western interests. Other Arabic newscasts presented much more conservative coverage of the event, perhaps with the intention of avoiding the enflaming of Arab opinion (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003; pg. 85).

Al Jazeera's current affairs analysis and debate programming, however, is seemingly its most controversial and affecting product. These shows have sparked debate in the Arab world and brought up issues normally deemed too sensitive for public discussion, let alone international broadcasting. Shaikh Hamad bin Thamar al Thani, Al Jazeera's chairman, refers to the strategy behind the shows as "*al-ra'y wa al-ra'i akber*" or "one opinion and another", with which he refers to the intended presentation of both sides of a story (TBS, 2001: [www.tbsjournal.com](http://www.tbsjournal.com)).

Of all Al Jazeera programmes, one of the most controversial, and thus most famous, is "Opposite Directions". The program, hosted by Syrian journalist, Faisal Qassim, claims to be independent in its selection of subject matter, usually of a sensitive nature. A much used technique is that of inviting guests with opposing opinions to discuss radical topics. Thus you have on one show an Islamist with a feminist debating polygamy; on another show a US official and a US critic discussing the bombing of Afghanistan. Qassim's leap to fame came following an interview with Muammar Qaddafi in which the Libyan leader acknowledged the right of the United States to seek revenge for September 11 (Rugh, 2004; pg. 230).

It is this type of programming that has caused a stir in the region. Programmes that discuss who a Palestinian might be raise sensitive issues that are rather quelled by fearful governments. Exemplary of this was a trailer for one such programme asking, "Why is it that when an Arab leader dies, people moan and wail as if the nation can't live without him? What have these leaders ever achieved for us? Aren't they symbols of corruption and backwardness and tyranny?" (*The Economist*, 2005: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)). The programming is not necessarily radical to the Western mind, for which often the very definition of good journalism is confused with controversy. Furthermore, these debates reflect everyday arguments that an Arab would have in a coffee shop, at dinner or on the way to the market. The difference is that Al Jazeera broadcasts these issues, giving them legitimacy. Not only that, but it does so in Arabic, breaking long-established customs. Initial reaction to Al Jazeera, says Yosri Fouda, deputy executive director of the channel, was utter shock from both ordinary Arabs and their governments, "It makes a hell of a difference when you say it

in Arabic,” says Fouada, who had begun his career with the BBC before moving on to Al Jazeera (Whitaker, 2001: [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)).

The interactive nature of these shows also offers the Arab audience a unique opportunity to pose questions directly to people in the know and to air opinions. The network has for once provided the people of the Arab world a soapbox from which to reach their brothers and sisters all across the region. “The fact is that before us the Arab media were controlled by political and security apparatuses, which dictated what went in,” said Jihad Ballout, Al Jazeera’s spokesman. “Al-Jazeera transgressed all that. People suddenly had access to all kinds of information that had been suppressed for 40 years. This forced regimes to grudgingly allow a bigger margin of freedom.” This is not an uncommon perspective (*The Economist*, 2005: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)). His view is widely shared. An Iraqi Al Jazeera reporter, Jian Al-Jacuby, explains that “for Arabs, Al Jazeera is revolutionary. Arab people, for a long time, just wanted someone to listen to them. That is the importance of Al Jazeera, to let people talk.” (Bradley, 2001: [www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com)).

The precise rate of viewership is largely difficult to accurately obtain, because of a limited amount of research in the field and a lack of an Arab rating system like the one’s used in Western countries. Satellite subscription statistics are largely unreliable because they don’t indicate the number of people who watch from the same source. As for the few statistical efforts that have been made, their results are largely unreliable because they do not access random samples of the population, or if they do, these samples are too small (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg. 46).

Some studies, however, do reflect the extent of Al Jazeera’s market penetration, allowing for the assertion by some observers that the news network is the most watched Arab satellite television station (Ghareeb, 2000: pg. 405). Another study reports that 70% of Arab satellite dish owners rely primarily on Al Jazeera for news and political information (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg. 33).

Some officials suggest that between 40 and 50 million Arabs watch Al Jazeera, taking into account 3 million in Europe and a few hundred thousand in the US. They go on to add that in times of crisis this figure doubles (Rugh, 2004; pg. 231).

Satellite ownership should also be called into question. There are reports that Al Jazeera has prompted millions to rush out and buy satellite dishes purely with the desire to watch its programming. There are even arguments suggesting many Arabs specifically save money to buy a satellite dish to this end, choosing this luxury over other necessities. Abdullah Al-Hajj, Al Jazeera’s deputy manager, has even claimed that several Arab women have gone so far as to sell their jewellery and buy a satellite dish and watch the channel (El-Nawawy & Iskandar: pg. 46). Whatever the case, satellite dishes certainly have blossomed on the rooftops of Arab capitals in recent years. In Palestine, for example, where economics often hinders the purchase of anything, let alone satellite dishes, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics calculate the following;

The findings indicated that Al Jazeera Satellite Channel in general is the most popular satellite channel in the Palestinian Territory. The percentage of Palestinian households viewing this channel amounted to 35.1% out of the total number of Palestinian households having satellite dish – 36.6% in the West Bank and 32.6% in Gaza Strip. Arab Radio and TV Channel (ART) occupies the second most popular channel (20.3%) followed by the MBC Satellite Channel (13.8%), the Egyptian Satellite Channel (10.7%), Bahrain Satellite Channel (6.6%), and LBC Satellite Channel (4.6%). As for viewing news bulletins, the findings of this survey indicate that 78.2% of the Palestinian households prefer Al Jazeera Satellite Channel, followed by the MBC Satellite Channel (6.6%)” (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005 ; [www.pcbs.gov.ps](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps)).

It becomes rather evident, then, that Al Jazeera’s content strikes a chord with its audience, encouraging Arabs throughout the world to tune in and voice their opinions. The target audience kindly obliges.

### **A view from the top**

President Mubarak visited Qatar once, and asked to be taken to see the Al Jazeera studios. It was a matter of personal interest to see how one of the world’s smallest states had stolen so much of his country’s audience, the largest Arab state. When he had completed his tour he exclaimed, “This matchbox! All this noise is coming out of this matchbox!” (Friedman, 2001: [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com)).

This comment is indicative of the general sentiment Arab leaders share towards Al Jazeera. Virtually every Arab government has, for one reason or another, criticised and complained about the network’s content (Rugh, 2004; pg. 232). This was visible, for example, during Al Jazeera’s coverage of the latest Palestinian intifadah and Israeli oppression when it made calls on Arab leaders to do more for the cause. The leaders expressed concern at Al Jazeera’s incitement of dissent (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, pg. 56).

There are whole lists of incidents that caused diplomatic problems for the region. During the winter of 1998-99, for example, Al Jazeera gave Saddam Hussein and other Iraqi officials some airtime in which they expressed points of view, even denouncing some Gulf rulers. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were naturally unimpressed. The Iraqi’s, however, were not amused by the station’s coverage of Saddam’s birthday (Ghareeb, 2000: pg. 408).

Governments would often respond by shutting down Al Jazeera’s offices in their territory. After a broadcast in November, 1998, during which Al Jazeera called Jordan an “artificial entity”, accusing the King of being in league with Israel, the Amman bureau was shut and correspondents’ accreditation cancelled. The bureau was only opened in February the following year after Qatar apologized. In June of that same year, Kuwait closed the networks bureau and banned it from reporting on Kuwaiti stories following a caller’s criticism of the Emir during a talk show. The ban was lifted and offices reopened the following month. The

Palestinian Authority closed the bureau in March, 2001 following a documentary which was critical of Yasser Arafat. The offices were only closed for two days though (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg.125-26).

One year later in May, neighbouring Bahrain cited that Al Jazeera “deliberately seeks to harm Bahrain” and “represents the Zionist side in the region.” Nabil al-Hamr, the country’s Information Minister, stated that reporting from within Bahrain was slanted for Israel and against them. It would seem that Bahraini officials had been upset by Al Jazeera’s reports on anti-US pro-Palestinian protests (AFP Report, 2002; pg. 35).

Other governments have chosen diplomatic tools to protest Al Jazeera coverage. When the network covered Moroccan-Israeli ties and Islamic fundamentalist, the government accused Al Jazeera of spearheading a “hostile campaign” in July 2000. It recalled its ambassador from Qatar in protest. He was reinstated in October. In April, 2000, Libya recalled its ambassador after allegations that it’s People’s Committees were a façade for Qaddafi. Meanwhile, Qaddafi has made a couple of guest appearances on the network, in recognition of its use as a stage. In August 2002, following criticism of the Hashemite Court, Jordan recalled its ambassador. September of the same year saw Saudi Arabia recalling its ambassador from Qatar because of Al Jazeera’s alleged betrayal of the Palestinians. In addition to all this, Al Jazeera’s application for membership in the Arab States Broadcasting Union was rejected by a joint Arab government resolution passed in December 1998, due to its non-conformity with the “code of honour of the Arab media” that “promotes brotherhood between Arab nations,” (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg. 124).

Some governments resort to legal action. Following a show on August 4, 2000, in which Al Jazeera alleged that Kuwait had killed Palestinians and Iraqis with acid, Kuwait sued the station. A Kuwaiti court found the network guilty of slander, and thus issued a fine. Some governments resort to more drastic measures. On January 27, 1999, Al Jazeera aired a debate between two critics of the Algerian government. During the transmission of the program, Algerian authorities cut Algiers’ electricity, leaving millions of Al Jazeera viewers in the dark (Rugh, 2004; pg. 233).

Perhaps a little more ethical is governmental use of official protests. The Egyptian government, for example, found Al Jazeera’s coverage of its 2000 elections less than flattering and did not appreciate the station’s “soft approach” towards Israel. The network’s presenters and commentators went on to criticize Mubarak for his lack of action regarding the Palestinian cause. The station illustrated its point with footage of Palestinians, all rather angry, burning Egyptian flags. After shutting down their offices, the Egyptian government responded on October 26, 2000, when Information Minister Safwat al-Sherif told viewers of a local morning show that Arab television “should not broadcast nonsense.” He went on to express his “hope that Al Jazeera’s stops attacking Egypt, otherwise (we will) forbid the channel from having studios and correspondents in Egypt, and even ban this channel from broadcasting by satellite,” (Iskandar & Nawary, 2003: 138). An Egyptian paper later ran a

series of cartoons depicting Al Jazeera presenters with Jewish surnames and wearing yamakas, feeding into the Arab tendency to believe conspiracies blaming all the wrongs of the Arab world on an Israeli conspiracy (Henderson, 2000: [www.washingtoninstitute.org](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org))

The Qatari's response to complaining Arab governments is usually to cite Al Jazeera's independence and that disagreements should be raised with the station itself. The station's response, hence, is that it cannot possibly be accused as biased - as it is criticized from so many different sides, these cancel each other out. Their collection of accusations include being pro-Iraqi following exclusive Baghdad reports in 1998, pro-Israeli for interviewing Israeli leaders and pro-Taliban/bin Laden during their coverage of the Afghani war following 9/11 (TBS 2, 2001: [www.tbsjournal.com](http://www.tbsjournal.com)).

The United States, of course, has not taken kindly to Al Jazeera's commentary and coverage of its activities in the Middle East. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has called it a "mouthpiece" for terrorists because of its airing of Osama bin Laden messages. In an interview featured in the movie *Control Room*, dealing with the Iraqi invasion, Rumsfeld carries on to say:

We know that Al Jazeera has a pattern of playing propaganda, over and over and over again. What they do is, when a bomb goes down they grab some children and women and pretend that the bomb hit the women and the children. And it seems to me that it's up to all of us to try to tell the truth, to say what we know, to say what we don't know and recognize that we are dealing with people that are perfectly willing to lie to the world to attempt to further their case, until ultimately they are caught lying and they lose their credibility and one would think it wouldn't take very long for that to happen, dealing with people like this," (Control Room, 2004: DVD).

Ironically Al Jazeera remains popular whilst President Bush's US public approval ratings are currently at 32% (BBC, 2006: [news.bbc.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk)).

The US responds to Al Jazeera in a number of ways. In October 2001, whilst visiting the Emir of Qatar, Khalifa, Colin Powell, US Secretary of State reportedly asked him for a toning down on the anti-American content featured in Al Jazeera. Qatar said it refused to interfere with free, factual and balanced news content. It must be said for Al Jazeera that where it provides bin Laden with a platform, it provides the same courtesy to the US. Immediately following the bin Laden statements aired on November 3 and December 27, 2001, were live comments by US government officials. These comments carried sharp criticism of bin Laden, leveling the playing field (El-Nawawy & Iskandar 2003: pg. 176).

Another manner in which the US attempts to take away from Al Jazeera reporting is through the shunning by senior officials of appearances. In the meantime, Bush has appeared in exclusives on Al Jazeera's rival station, the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya (*The Economist*, 2005: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)). The effect of this is attributed to have decreased the viewership of Al Jazeera in favour of Al Arabiya;

“The latest monthly television ratings in Saudi Arabia by the independent pollster [IPSOS-STAT](#) show [al-Arabiya](#) dramatically widening its lead over al-Jazeera as the number one satellite television news outlet for the Middle East. The United States government's choice to give al-Arabiya an [exclusive interview](#) with Donald Rumsfeld could be an effect of the lead increase,” (Snyder, 2006: [uscpublicdiplomacy.com](#)).

The most spectacular way in which the US protests, or not, is through the “accidental” bombing of Kabul and Baghdad offices during air strikes. The United States bombed its offices in Afghanistan in 2001, shelled a hotel in Basra in which only Al Jazeera journalists were guests in April 2003, and killed Iraq correspondent Tareq Ayoub a few days later in Baghdad in a missile attack on their offices. It has also imprisoned several Al Jazeera reporters, some of whom have been sent to Guantanamo, whilst others describe being tortured. The current US-supported Iraqi government has itself banned Al Jazeera. (Scahill, 2005: [www.thenation.com](#)).

So considering that so many governments come a-knocking on Qatar’s door, it would be interesting to understand the nature of Al Jazeera and Qatar’s relationship. It is important to remember that a majority of the networks financing does indeed come from the Qatari government. Added to this, Al Jazeera’s chairman, Hamad bin Thamar al-Thani, is a cousin of the Emir, and happens to also occupy the chair of the government’s radio and television system. However, Faisal Qassim, a talk show host who had gained years of experience at the BBC, suggests that he now enjoys far more freedom at Al Jazeera. He adds that the lack of Qatari news on the network can be attributed to the country’s size and the lack of news-worthy events (Alterman, 1998: pg. 23-24).

This is disputed by a detailed study, however, in which Al Jazeera is shown to cover negative stories regarding Qatar’s equally small neighbour Bahrain, as well as having invited opposition speakers from every Arab country save for Qatar. The lack of democracy, for example, in the emirate, is never mentioned. It is suggested that Al Jazeera’s respect for Qatari taboos, not extended to any other government, is partly due to the network’s use as a public relations tool, helping to maintain Qatar’s image of progressiveness. Amongst incidents that Al Jazeera could have reported on but didn’t, are a dispute between the Emir and his son, the Emir’s decision to postpone parliamentary elections for two years without an explanation and, generally, Qatari foreign policy. Once in a while, it will make a concession to a sensitive issue, like the time it invited a Kuwaiti professor who was critical of Israel being invited to the Doha economic summit (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, pg. 88).

Officials at Al Jazeera, however, persistently argue that “red lines” do not exist and that the station remains politically even-handed. To illustrate this they point out the variety of talk shows that invite both Islamists and secularists, Qataris and Bahrainis, and all sorts of people with diverging points of view (TBS 2, 2001: [www.tbsjournal.com](#)). Al Jazeera further cites its coverage of torture accusations levied against Qatari Foreign Minister Shaikh Hamad bin Jasim by name, as well as the fact that a 1995 coup plotter had accused the police of torture.

It must also be said that even Qatari officials would admit that Al Jazeera is cautious on its reporting of the ruling family and the country's "heritage". This is defended, however, by their claim that, as a regional channel, Al Jazeera would be unconcerned with a small country's domestic affairs, whose issues are largely ignored by other similar broadcasters, like CNN or BBC (Rugh, 2004: 132).

Middle Eastern analyst Naomi Sakr wraps it up:

Al Jazeera 's output indicates that it has been given considerable scope. Its staff prioritizes stories according to their newsworthiness.... Along with LBC and the pay-TV provider Orbit, Al Jazeera has accelerated the trend towards live and compelling talk-show programming that has obliged the older channels to keep up with the competition. (Sakr, 1999: pg. 6.)

### **The Al Jazeera effect**

Arabs tend to disagree on the role and impact of Al Jazeera on the Arab world. A Middle East expert points out that the station "has raised the level of debate and opened the door for freer and more accurate news in the Arab world." Another study, conducted by Arab-American scholars, concluded that the network is a rallying point for dissent in the region. Though, they argue, it has a lot of content that could be considered anti-American, it does provide plenty of opportunity for the US to explain itself. The study goes on to point out similarities between the station and its relationship with its host country and that of the BBC with the UK. (Sharp, 2003: ics.leeds.ac.uk).

Others would argue that Al Jazeera and its shows are certainly balanced and contribute greatly to the Arab political process. Ibrahim Hilal, Al Jazeera's chief editor, vehemently denies that the station holds any point of view and that if there is some anti-American content it is because the station is merely conveying the general feeling in the Arab world, and adds, "That's not our problem," (Waxman, 2001: www.washingtonpost.com).

Some would not entirely agree. One scholar refutes the idea that Al Jazeera is a non-promoter of democracy, alleging that there are several talk shows and reporters whose presentations tend to be slanted. Others accuse network reporters of being fiercely opinionated, Islamists or pan-Arab leftist nationalists, presenting "an aggressive mix of anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism, and these hostilities drive the station's coverage, " whilst calculatedly pouring petrol on the fire of Muslim outrage. Afghani presentations illustrating the Taliban point of view and the persistent use of Palestinian victims' footage as promotional material lend credence to this argument. One Arab journalist would agree commenting that, "Al Jazeera has a big problem with objectivity.... They are being led by the masses, they don't lead the masses. They know the taste of the Arab street and the Arab street is anti-American," (Waxman, 2001: www.cursor.org).

A lot of this criticism can be attributed to a war of words. AL Jazeera, of course, coming from a different perspective, side, angle, language and general mentality, uses language alien to Western terminology. While the West refers to “terrorists” and “targeted killings” when reporting on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Al Jazeera prefers to speak of “martyrs” and “assassinations”. It would follow, if your audience is Arabic and you are reporting on Arab insurgents dying for a cause, then they could well be regarded as martyrs (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003: pg. 53). Why should Western bias, then, be the order of the day on an Arabic channel? The use of these terms, more than anything, reflect the essence of the conflict and the basic differences in Arab and Western perceptions of subjects at hand, rather than a biased Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera’s Washington bureau chief, Hafiz Mirazi, points out, that far from being biased, Al Jazeera is merely catering to demand. Where the US audience found it acceptable to air the bodies of US soldiers in Somalia and thus affect public opinion, so too does Al Jazeera have the right and duty to show footage and reports that reinforce concern amongst Arabs about Palestinian suffering. (Mirazi, 2001: [www.asiasource.org](http://www.asiasource.org)).

The Arab print media often defends Al Jazeera, even if their own government is against it, as inevitably they are. Salama Ahmed Salama, former managing editor of Al-Ahram newspaper and now a highly respected columnist, described Al Jazeera as having thrown “a stone into the stagnant waters of the official and traditional media,” and though there may certainly exist Al Jazeera staffers who would express anti-Egyptian sentiment, grievances tend to come from those Egyptians who are “overly sensitive and don't like criticism,” (TBS, 2000: [www.tbsjournal.com](http://www.tbsjournal.com)).

Regardless of the stance one might take on Al Jazeera objectivity, whether it is even a reasonable demand or not, the station has certainly had an immense impact on the region. The station’s open debate format and attitude has influenced other broadcasters to pursue similar techniques. This would include the rise of flashy graphics and real-time reporting. Equally, it has spurred on the rise of pan-Arab news networks, if only to air competing views. The most noteworthy of these is Al Arabiya. Regardless of whether one is more pro-American/Saudi, or not, the fact remains that the Arab people now have access to a selection of news, whereas before the majority relied on what the government had to say (Alterman, 1998: pg. 23-24).

This in itself hides an important phenomenon. Al Jazeera has allowed for the homogenization of social movements, no least of which is Muslim religious practice. In January 2005, for example, Saudi authorities abruptly announced to the world the start of the Muslim lunar month of Dhu’l Hijja a day earlier than it was expected. During the course of this month, four days are reserved for the performance of *haj* rituals at Mecca, as Muslims throughout the world celebrate Eid. This meant that people with travel arrangements and organized events had to drastically and quickly alter it all. Previously, governments could have chosen to ignore Saudi calls, claiming that their own astronomers knew better. Regardless of the amount of chaos this change in calendar caused, all Muslim countries, with the exception of Indonesia, were forced to tow the Saudi line, simply because Muslims the

world over could now watch their comrades gathered at Mecca's Mount of Mercy (*The Economist*, 2005: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)).

Equally, the Arabic language, rich and diverse, has enjoyed a cultural revival previously unknown. There exist strong language and accent variations across the Arab world, as with any widespread language. The Arabic dialect spoken in Iraq is practically unintelligible to someone from Morocco. Natives from different parts of the world would generally hear their own dialect on a daily basis, with other forms of the language largely ignored, unknown or reserved for special occasions. Al Jazeera has brought the classical speech reserved for literature to the everyday person and allowed accents that were normally as exotic as a foreign language to become part of their reality. Higher Arabic has ceased to be the exclusive property of the educated, now belonging to the Arab population at large (*The Economist*, 2005: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)).

Furthermore, Al Jazeera has single-handedly managed to break "all the traditional taboos that prevented Arab media from tackling sensitive political, social, religious, and economic issues... Critically the channel has redefined the role of television stations in the region. It has provided an open forum for those previously denied a voice in the Gulf," (WPSF Review, 1999: [services.cms.apa.at.cms](http://services.cms.apa.at.cms)).

Finally, Al Jazeera has placed Qatar on the global radar as a relatively progressive Middle Eastern nation prepared to promote the very democratic value of a free-press. There is a problem, however, lying in the station's apparent lack of extensive criticism directed against Al Jazeera's host, sponsor and creator. Having said this, far more pressing issues featured on the international agenda have received extensive coverage from a different perspective than had ever been available. Its relationship to the Qatari government, however, places a question mark on the station's future.

### **Conclusion: An Arab Renaissance?**

With the ever increasing speed and extent of globalization, a post-modernist tendency and outlook has certainly become popular. The self is questioned in light of what they are a product of, and modernity is identified as a personal achievement, endogenous, rather than imposed from outside. It is in this questioning of the outside and growing acceptance of what is within, that entire regions have been rediscovering aspects of themselves and looking towards a more local flavour for future determinants. Thus South African president Thabo Mbeki's "African Renaissance" ideology, through which a promotion of and appreciation for all things African and African solutions for African problems are encouraged, is not necessarily limited to Africa. The Arab world has long talked of an Arab Renaissance, beginning with the arrival of Napoleon's regiment in Egypt when the Islamic world got a view of what other civilizations were like and what, in the eyes of some, their world should be like. Following much evolution and change, ranging from pan-Arabist to Islamist movements, none, however, has evidently fostered such a uniform change across such a spread of the Arab world as Al Jazeera has. Not even Arab nationalism. Is Al Jazeera, then, the voice of an Arab renaissance, a rebirth of the mind?

From its rather low-key beginnings in 1996, Al Jazeera has certainly come a long way. So too has the Middle East. There have been dramatic developments, including an almost-signed Israeli/Palestinian peace deal in 2000, the consequent failure and intifadah, and the invasion of Iraq and its consequent descent into chaos. Al Jazeera has been there every step of the way providing live reporting, followed with extensive analysis, serving the Arab population the facts and opinions on a silver platter.

How has this affected the Arab mind and the Arab world at large? It has firstly given the people of the region a voice, a place to air out concerns that had previously been limited to coffee shops. It has allowed for people to make their own judgments on the information provided. Leaving all qualms regarding the network's objectivity aside, the station has provided Arabs the world over with the opportunity to decide for themselves what they will take in and what not. Governments have been forced to leave their century-old tradition of providing their populations with what they needed to know. This raises questions of accountability in the Arab mind, and whether their government's way is indeed the only way.

Al Jazeera has brought to the people of the Arab world an astounding degree of choice. Seeing a different life, perhaps even an attractive one, paraded in Hollywood movies and on Western media is quite different to seeing similar differences highlighted in neighbouring, supposedly culturally homogenous, countries. Even the most oppressed of Saudi women who stay at home and never stray far from the men in their lives, are in a position to observe that the taboo of driving cars is not a privilege enjoyed by the "loose" women of the West, but also by their sisters in nearby Dubai or Kuwait. Equally, where free and fair elections might have been a characteristic of the Christian West, an Egyptian or a Syrian might be surprised and excited to learn of similar events in Palestine or Iraq. This fosters a change in the attitude and perception of "them versus us". Who is "us" has now become a very real issue for Arabs. "Who is them" is a question governments certainly fear.

Al Jazeera, as we have seen, suffers from an extraordinary amount of criticism from a variety of sources, not least of which are angered Arab governments and Western leaders who find Al Jazeera's reporting intrusive and dangerous. It is only dangerous because these global leaders fear finding themselves accountable before the people they affect. It would have been far easier for the United States' efforts in Iraq to do so without the critical eye of the Arab media. Al Jazeera offered a different angle to what was going on and questioned American information. One scene in *Control Room* poignantly expresses this. It refers to the issuing by the US Military media outlet of reports that US troops had taken a bridge over the Tigris River during the 2003 Iraq invasion. The only bridge over the Tigris, however, happened to be at El Kut, a location that very same army had said it was not even close to. Western media, however, went on to report the taking of the bridge, in their version of unbiased war coverage. The problem with Al Jazeera's bias is that it is not slanted in anyone's favour except for the Arab people. Why should a nation not be entitled to watching their own news through their own lens?

There are plans in the pipeline to create an International Al Jazeera network to be presented in English. However, threats since 2003 to make this a reality have never been followed up

on with actions. It would certainly be in the Qatari interest to follow through with this, and extend its business card to the rest of the world. It would also allow the public at large to form its own opinion on Al Jazeera content, or at least its international version. If this avenue had been available to a Western audience, perhaps the war on Iraq could have taken a different turn. One of the greatest failures of the Iraqi invasion and subsequent efforts at peace-building has been the persistent, staggering ignorance with which relevant administrations have dealt with the situation. If a bit of information about a people, from a people, were available, there stands a hope that a conflict might be prevented, however slight. At the very least, it would have given the world another reason to call Bush an idiot.

Al Jazeera is, perhaps, a contradiction, but then its motto, “the opinion and the other opinion”, doesn’t hide this fact. It is undeniable that Al Jazeera is a force for change in the Arab world, perhaps even fostering democracy. It is not, however, reasonable to ignore its pitfalls. Yet it is certainly one of the most, if not the most, viable networks of its kind within the region. Its revolution has been to challenge the censorship imposed by state-run media and has considered issues of the day, ranging from democracy to fundamentalism, corruption to human rights violations and US invasion tactics to urban insurgency.

Though it is not the perfect media outlet (because there is no such thing), it has given Arabs the choice of self-determination, introduced them to the idea of transparency, and given them the facts on democracy. It has allowed Arabs a sense of unified pride, perhaps succeeding where Nasser and other great Arab nationalists failed. In this sense, Al Jazeera is certainly responsible for an Arab Renaissance. When Europe entered its Renaissance, it borrowed back knowledge the Arab world had been the custodian of since the collapse of Byzantium. Europe’s rebirth brought about great change and notions of democracy. Through Al Jazeera, the exchange has come full circle. The Europeans took the baton and ran with it. They came up with modern democracy and freedom of the press. Now Al Jazeera has taken the baton and is running with it. It will be exciting to see the Arabian flavoured result of this experiment in years to come. If it is not distinctly Arab in character, though, it just won’t do.

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