

The Price of Aljazeera's Politics

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Mohamed Fahmy, an award-winning journalist and author, is the former Aljazeera English Egypt bureau chief.



Articles & Testimony

The network's leadership has manipulated the truth and revealed itself as a mouthpiece for extremism, rather than providing a much-needed forum for the region's many independent voices.

As a journalist, it has always been my preference to remain behind the headlines rather than make them. However, the past eighteen months have seen a reversal of roles as we three Aljazeera journalists -- Baher Mohamed, Peter Greste, and I -- face high-profile charges in Egypt. We stand accused of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, a banned terrorist organization in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

The three of us have endured two separate trials sandwiched around an appeals court ruling, which overturned an initial seven-year sentence. And as I await another verdict, I'm confident that on the basis of the evidence -- or lack thereof -- we should be acquitted. I hope that soon my long ordeal will be over and I can get on with my life.

But I am also aware that this trial is influenced by factors other than personal evidence against us. So I am deeply worried that my colleagues and I will take the fall for violations committed by Aljazeera. We may pay a heavy price for Qatar, the network's owner, meddling in Egypt's domestic affairs.

As the most organized and politically cunning opposition in Egypt during the Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood was able to hijack the Egyptian people's aspirations at a time of great upheaval. Now, Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi faces a turbulent road to restore an effective and representative Egyptian government, but the pro-Brotherhood aspects of Aljazeera have little interest in supporting Sisi.

From my research during my incarceration -- where I spent more than four hundred days -- interviewing incarcerated activists, I have come to understand better the murky Masonic-style modus operandi of the Muslim Brotherhood.

This research began to provide me with some understanding of how I arrived in court. And while I strongly oppose the Egyptian state's increasing limits on reporters and freedom of speech, I now understand how Egyptian

authorities could conceivably link Aljazeera with the Muslim Brotherhood.

In a recent interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on my predicament, Aljazeera America's new CEO, Al Anstey, spoke repeatedly about how Aljazeera's different channels reach "different demographics." He also discussed how Aljazeera shares content between the different stations, which he described as "normal practice." Those different demographics, I have come to learn, go to the heart of the chameleon that is Aljazeera.

When I agreed to become its Cairo bureau chief in September 2013, I relied on Aljazeera English's strong reputation for journalistic independence and integrity to make my decision. The network repeatedly assured me that our legitimate journalism wouldn't be undermined or tainted by Aljazeera's other channels. I expected the network to honor that commitment. It didn't.

I had not realized the depths to which other Aljazeera stations would stoop to reach those demographics so different from Aljazeera English. I soon learned that branches of Aljazeera employed spectacularly different approaches for gathering and making editorial decisions on the news. Aljazeera English provided true news while other channels operated as broadcast networks dedicated to the Muslim Brotherhood. As one former Aljazeera journalist admitted, "In Egypt, we have become the palace broadcaster" for the Brotherhood.

Aljazeera's Mubasher Misr channel is emblematic of this issue. Although Egyptian authorities banned this channel, Mubasher Misr continued broadcasting antigovernment programming into Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood's political messaging. This channel had a strong political slant without an impartial editorial line. I was horrified to see our English-language packages, dubbed into Arabic and altered with an aggressive pro-Muslim Brotherhood slant, rebroadcast time and again on the banned channel.

I repeatedly asked my bosses in Doha to stop, knowing that this practice put us, the journalists, at great risk. Each time, the network told me not to worry and that it would not happen again. But the network did not honor those promises. Because Aljazeera continued to repurpose our English-language content for illegal broadcasts, I ended up in jail.

In court, these broken promises allowed the prosecution's lead national security witness to testify that I had "worked for the banned Aljazeera Mubasher," even though this testimony was inaccurate.

A steely faced Anstey denied to the CBC that our packages had been aired in full by Mubasher Misr. When pressed, he claimed he would have to see "the package to answer that in detail." But Aljazeera's own press office contradicted Anstey by acknowledging that the sharing of our English-language packages "may have happened on a very small number of occasions."

Anstey, who was managing director of Aljazeera English at the time of my arrest, was ultimately responsible for ensuring that proper operational licenses were in place to meet Egyptian legal requirements. However, the network's own lawyer warned executives that the network was not properly licensed for us to operate legally, a warning these executives ignored. While sitting in the courtroom prisoners' cage, we learned that the prosecutor was alleging that Aljazeera's broadcast licenses were not in place despite documented management assurances to me that all the legalities were in order.

Surely, if Aljazeera executives like Al Anstey broke the law, they should face the penalties in the Egyptian courts -- one to three years in jail and/or fines -- not Aljazeera's journalists.

The transgressions by Aljazeera also dictated that our legal strategy for the retrial meant distancing ourselves from the negligent actions of the network. The intent was to show that we journalists in the dock were just doing our jobs. The Aljazeera lawyer representing Baher Mohamed in the retrial weeks back highlighted that during interrogations, Baher stated that he correctly translated a televised speech by President Sisi. Then, the network presented cuts of

Baher's translation out of context in order to depict Sisi calling for civil strife between the Egyptian people and the Brotherhood. Baher's testimony was cited in the charge sheet, the prosecutor's case, and in the judgment giving reasons for the seven-year sentence handed down to us three journalists during our first trial in June of 2013.

My bosses also neglected to tell me that they had commissioned Muslim Brotherhood members to cover the Brotherhood's own antigovernment protests and sell the footage to the banned Arabic arms of the Aljazeera network. While in prison, I interviewed some of these activists who were caught and jailed. They openly acknowledged receiving cameras and broadcast equipment from Aljazeera. Some of those activists also informed me that they used the money they received in return for their work to print posters for their rallies and provide food for protestors. Upon my release on bail, I reviewed their official interrogation records and confirmed this.

Their families also shared with me their fury at Aljazeera for using their sons without explaining to them that their actions would break the law. This is not citizen journalism. We three journalists and our colleagues Sue Turton, Dominic Kane, and Mohamed Fawzy, who were sentenced to ten years in absentia, would have not accepted this nonsense. My team was kept in the dark by a network that has opted to become part of the struggle -- an agent of change rather than a recorder and interpreter of events.

As I wait in these final days before the judge hands down a verdict, I am struck by how Anstey can coolly talk about "different demographics" as if Aljazeera presents the same so-called media integrity across all its outlets. It clearly doesn't.

It has become clear to me now how much emphasis Aljazeera places on framing and distributing a potentially dangerous and biased point of view, created by Aljazeera's owners and backers in Qatar.

Recently, Qatar's role internationally has been subject to increased scrutiny. Qatar flatters Western governments and invests in eye-catching global projects in Paris, London, and New York. At the same time, it gives voice to terrorist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and other extreme Islamist groups across the Middle East. Doha's appetite for keeping dubious company runs deep, and Aljazeera plays a central role.

In 2003, senior Aljazeera journalist Taysir Allouni was sentenced to prison in Spain for helping al-Qaeda transfer money to key operatives in Spain as he reported on their activities. Allouni is famous for interviewing Osama bin Laden in October 2001, shortly after the September 11 attacks. Upon his release from prison, Allouni returned to Qatar, where he was welcomed back by then Aljazeera director-general Ahmed bin Jassim al-Thani.

Last month, Aljazeera aired an extended interview with Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the emir of Jabhat al-Nusra. It was the leader's second interview on Aljazeera since 2013, when the militant Islamist group split from what is now known as ISIS. Senior Aljazeera Arabic presenter Ahmed Mansour conducted the hour-long interview from an undisclosed location with Julani, who did not show his face as he sat on an ornate armchair. "Our options are open when it comes to targeting the Americans if they will continue their attacks against us in Syria. Everyone has the right to defend themselves," Julani warned. The program was so deferential to the terrorist leader that it has been described as Qatar's "infomercial" for al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. The network labeled him as the head of a "rebel" group.

Three weeks after the interview, German authorities detained, then released Ahmed Mansour, who holds dual Egyptian and British citizenship, as the Cairo Criminal Court had convicted the veteran in absentia with a fifteen-year sentence. This sentence emerged from charges that he participated in the torture and questioning of lawyer Osama Kamal in Tahrir Square during the uprising against President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Aljazeera has even covered the hotel bills for exiled Muslim Brotherhood leaders staying in Doha.

It is clear that Qatar uses Aljazeera as a tool of influence to advance the cause of the Muslim Brotherhood. Senior Qatari leaders including former prime minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani have even suggested to foreign officials

that Aljazeera's coverage can be altered in exchange for actions that complement Qatar's state interests.

Current and former Aljazeera employees have repeatedly argued that the broadcasting network lacks impartiality and promotes a pro-Islamist narrative. The former Aljazeera director-general from 2006 to 2011, Wadah Khanfar, who recently signed on with Arianna Huffington for her new HuffPost Arabi, was described on the Muslim Brotherhood's own website in 2007 as having been "one of the most prominent leaders in the Hamas Office in Sudan."

The same year, Aljazeera Arabic's Washington bureau chief, Hafez al-Mirazi, resigned in protest over the station's "Islamic drift," stating that "from the first day of the Wadah Khanfar era, there was a dramatic change especially because of him selecting assistants who are hardline Islamists."

In 2012, Aktham Suliman, Aljazeera Arabic's Berlin bureau chief for ten years, resigned in protest over Qatar's influence over the channel. He explained that "it's not a good feeling when you have the impression that you're no longer a journalist, you're basically just a guard dog responding to your owner's whistle when he tells you to go after this state or that government...with the Qatari ruler always the one calling the tune."

I started with the best of intentions at Aljazeera English -- objectively reporting on the Arab Spring, one of the biggest stories of our time, with an Arab voice to the Arab world and beyond. However, Aljazeera has used my work to support the extremist and inflammatory narrative of the Muslim Brotherhood.

It was a lost opportunity. The network's slogan, "The opinion and the other opinion," represents a mirage, as the coverage fails to give voice to Qatar's opposition, which calls for the right to protest and form political parties and labor unions. More than ever, the region needs independent voices and reporting to make sense of the forces of change and the possibilities for a better, more peaceful future. Aljazeera had that potential. Sadly, its leadership has instead manipulated the truth and has revealed itself as a mouthpiece for extremism.

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