

Arabs View the War: Images, Attitudes, and Opinions

by [Jonathan Schanzer \(/experts/jonathan-schanzer\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Jonathan Schanzer \(/experts/jonathan-schanzer\)](#)

Jonathan Schanzer, a former terrorism finance analyst at the Treasury Department, is senior vice president at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.



Brief Analysis

H AFEZ AL-MIRAZI

War remains a horrifying event and al-Jazeera will cover it realistically. Images carried by the network are graphic, but do not discriminate in showing American and Iraqi casualties. Similarly, al-Jazeera has covered both the unprecedented airpower brought to bear by the allied forces and the Iraqi government's own version of "shock and awe" in airing videotapes of American prisoners of war; failure to do so would challenge the station's credibility.

In the Middle East, al-Jazeera is unique in that it has provided American officials with an unprecedented platform to air their views, live and uncensored, directly to an Arab audience. Whereas the 1991 war witnessed a close correlation between Arab and American opinion, the current conflict with Iraq has proven much more divisive. Accordingly, images of suffering will inflame sentiments, irrespective of the explanations provided by either side. The American effort to minimize civilian casualties has not appreciably altered the mood on the street. Conversely, identifying Iraqi citizens and soldiers as hostages of Saddam's tyranny has proven detrimental to Washington's efforts to win Arab hearts and minds.

During the Clinton years, public outrage fueled by televised images of American soldiers dragged through the streets of Somalia spurred the United States to withdraw its forces, despite admonitions against doing so from official circles. If independent media can influence policy in countries with well-established democratic institutions, its effect will be magnified in those without them. In this respect, the United States should continue its relationship with al-Jazeera. Official engagement will convince the Arab public that their opinions matter to Washington and that American support for free speech applies to the Middle East as it does elsewhere. In addition, the more American opinions are available to Arab audiences, the more difficult it becomes for terrorist organizations to depict the United States as a monolithic force inimical to Arab interests. Finally, al-Jazeera can serve as a channel for conveying Arab opinion to the United States. In this regard, the station may play a role in discouraging miscalculation, as occurred when the American and British governments misjudged the reaction of Iraqi citizens to the presence of foreign soldiers.

MOUAFAC HARB

Unfortunately, the proliferation of Arab satellite networks has done little to improve the quality of Arab media. These new media organizations have at times been provocative and unethical in their reportage, indulging the emotions of

the "Arab street." Such distortions do not reflect the biases of Arab reporters, most of whom have worked in Western media, but are an extension of the dysfunctional Arab political system upon which these networks remain dependent. Such concern is particularly relevant with regard to al-Jazeera, the Arab world's most popular satellite news network. Despite unprecedented viewership levels, it has failed to establish itself as a credible and objective media institution, remaining dependent on subsidies from the Qatari government.

While it must be conceded that an American point of view is available on al-Jazeera, most of the time it is taken out of context or subject to distortion. For example, promotions for the nightly news contrast American military power with the suffering of Iraqi civilians, while interviews with counter-elites staunchly opposed to American policy and even to America itself follow briefings by American officials. Meanwhile, al-Jazeera provides terrorist organizations with a platform from which to wage their own public relations campaigns. Continued American involvement with the Qatari station may encourage further radicalization of the Arab media. This also has a hand in convincing rival stations that the best way to attract Washington's attention is through negative coverage of American policy.

While al-Jazeera poses a long-term threat to Arab-American relations, the effects of its coverage should not be overstated. For one, al-Jazeera remains a station that has built a reputation on successive crises: Osama bin Laden, the Palestinian intifada, and the war with Iraq. As these events dissipate, people will turn elsewhere for news. Second, while public outrage threatens American interests, it has rarely resulted in political change. In this regard, the American military campaign in Iraq will not appreciably endanger the stability of allied regimes. Regardless, the United States must continue to address the Arab public, but in a manner that ensures the American point of view will be presented clearly and in context.

Given the complexity of government-media relations in the Middle East, it is unlikely that Arab media would depict democratic change in Iraq favorably. It is an obvious threat to regional autocracies. As such, America must look to its own resources for balance. It is in this context that the U.S. government hopes to launch its own satellite news channel in the Arab world.

JONATHAN SCHANZER

Images broadcast by Arab satellite television depict a volatile Arab public, an apparent vindication of those who warned of the debilitating effect of any American-led war on regional stability. Yet, there is reason to believe that such sentiments may not pose a long-term threat to the stability of Arab governments. Historically, most protests in the Arab world have been fueled by economic crises, and those that have been political have rarely resulted in regime change. In the months prior to war, most demonstrations remained relatively small, numbering no more than several hundred participants. It was not until regimes began sanctioning protests in February and March that the numbers climbed into the hundreds of thousands, and most of the demonstrations were clearly orchestrated by Arab leaders to co-opt public opposition to the war for political gain.

Once war broke out, the Arab street seemed to erupt. Regime tolerance of public dissent may actually benefit both American interests and Arab governments. Regime acceptance of nonconformist opinion may allow social protest to take the place of radical violence, thus frustrating the spread of terrorism. Equally important, any relaxation of regime controls on dissent may encourage further political liberalization. The Tunisian government, for example, recently allowed opposition parties to organize their first demonstration in over ten years. Such changes are significant and should not be overlooked.

Still, areas of concern persist. Areas of weak political authority -- such as the refugee camps, southern Jordan, Upper Egypt, and parts of Yemen -- remain political hotspots where persistent instability could degenerate into antiregime violence. A more important factor, however, is how Arab media -- in particular al-Jazeera as the most watched Arab news source -- depict the Iraq crisis. Al-Jazeera, while clearly possessing higher levels of journalistic integrity than

many of its counterparts, continues to fuel public outrage through provocative images and inflammatory rhetoric. This may complicate American efforts for postwar rapprochement.

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