Public opinion in the West has been deeply influenced by television news pictures for several decades in the 1960s, Vietnam was the first "television war." But in the Arab world, the violence between Palestinians and Israelis that erupted at the end of September has been the first cycle of Arab-Israeli fighting to be carried by various recently established Arab satellite television channels. The most well-known of these channels is al-Jazeera (Arabic for "the Peninsula"), broadcast from the Persian Gulf state of Qatar. Broadcasts of events in the Palestinian territories, received across borders and largely beyond control of local governments, reach directly into the living rooms of many parts of the Arab world. They have added to a ground swell of public opinion that Arab governments have found they cannot ignore. From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, Arab governments are worried they have lost control of information, one of the key means they have used to stay in power in the past. Diplomats in the region have dubbed the phenomenon "the al-Jazeera effect."

The Impact of Television in the Arab World Pictures of bullets tearing into the young Palestinian boy, Mohammed al-Dura, sheltering with his father during clashes between Palestinian gunmen and Israeli soldiers at the Netzarim junction in the Gaza Strip have been broadcast repeatedly on all Arab television stations. Crown Prince Abdullah, the effective ruler of Saudi Arabia, specifically referred to the incident when he addressed the Arab summit in Cairo in October. But the Saudi leader, who was standing in for the ailing King Fahd, did not mention the protests that had erupted in his own deeply Muslim and conservative society. Although political demonstrations are banned in the kingdom, there were reportedly gatherings in support of the Palestinians in several towns and cities. Fearing that domestic grievances would be added to the pan-Arab agenda, the demonstrations were broken up by Saudi security forces.

There are no accurate audience figures for the new Arabic-language satellite channels that provide coverage to much
of the Arab world. But there is little doubt that the audience is from across the range of Arab social strata. A satellite
dish typically costs $200, but it can be connected to as many as twenty households in the shanty areas of the West
Bank. In countries where dishes are supposed to be controlled (such as Saudi Arabia), there is widespread evasion of
any restrictions.

The two apparently most successful broad-based entertainment channels are the London-based but Saudi-owned
MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center) and the Beirut-based LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation). MBC
broadcasts an Arabic version of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" and its television news programs are widely
watched. Al-Jazeera, broadcast from the Qatari capital, Doha, is a 24-hour news channel and is considered more
controversial. By most accounts this is a deliberate policy of the channel, which was established in 1996 after the
British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) ended a joint venture with a Saudi company for an Arabic television service
broadcast from London. Many of the Arab editors, reporters, and technicians from the failed BBC service moved to
Doha to work with al-Jazeera.

The BBC venture had collapsed after less than two years partly after concern by the Saudi partner, owned by a
relative by marriage of King Fahd, about coverage of events in the kingdom. Al-Jazeera shows little inhibition in its
broadcasting about Saudi Arabia or other Arab states. Qatar, which broke off diplomatic links with Israel last month
after Saudi Arabia made it a condition of attending an Islamic summit in Doha, has reportedly guaranteed to help
finance the station for five years. A relative of the emir, Sheikh Hamad, runs the station.

Al-Jazeera, which has crews in the West Bank and Gaza, can provide live coverage of riots via satellite link. Although
it habitually refers to Palestinian dead as "martyrs," many Arab states accuse it of links with Israel because of its
willingness to interview Israelis. Egypt shut down the al-Jazeera facilities in Cairo after a minor Palestinian figure
called on air for Egyptians to rise up against President Hosni Mubarak. An Egyptian newspaper subsequently
published cartoons of al-Jazeera presenters, giving them Jewish names and showing them wearing kippot (skull
caps). In the same broadcast, the Palestinian claimed Jews suck the blood of Arabs for use in Passover ceremonies
but the Egyptian government did not complain about this comment, perhaps because it is a common allegation in
the Egyptian media.

The stations ability to inflame stretches across a whole gamut of subjects. Last year the United States was annoyed
when the station broadcast the Arab worlds first interview with the Saudi dissident and international terrorist,
Osama bin Laden. Another tape of bin Laden was broadcast two months ago.

Al-Jazeera is sensationalist, Islamic, and pan-Arabic, but it mirrors Dohas policy concerns in more ways than it
might care to acknowledge. The station gives special attention to criticisms of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two
governments that opposed the current emir of Qatars seizure of power from his father in 1995 and that have
subsequently tried to destabilize his regime. Meanwhile, it calls for lifting sanctions on Iraq and emphasizes good
news about Iran, with which Qatar shares the worlds largest natural gas field. And the television station avoids
reporting on all contentious domestic issues, in particular questions about the health of the fifty-year-old,
overweight emir who has already had two kidney transplant operations and his declared heir, his third son Sheikh
Jassim, who is only twenty-two.

Other Arab television channels are also increasingly available, at least to wealthier Arabs. Many such channels can
be watched in hotels and by expatriate communities in many parts of North America, Europe, and Asia. Many state-
owned channels, as well as private channels such as that run by the Lebanese Hizbullah, are available on the
Internet. Many Arab governments would prefer al-Jazeera to simply disappear. But Saudi Arabias tactics of buying
up pan-Arab newspapers (such as al-Hayat and as-Shaq al-Awsat) and controlling the bigger Arab advertising
agencies cannot be repeated in this case. For the time being, state-run Arab TV stations doggedly offer no
competition, still beginning news programs with several minutes of newsreel of where the ruler went today and
whom he met images supposed to reinforce the very link between the states and leadership in the eyes of the citizenry, a link which is now being undermined.

Because of the increasing access to alternative electronic news sources, Arab governments have come to realize over the last year that they cannot stop their people watching news and comment which although emanating from abroad is often about their own country. Whereas the "Voice of the Arabs" radio station broadcast from Cairo in the 1960s by the regime of President Gamal Abdel Nasser also had a regional audience, its news was often wrong and its commentaries the subject of ridicule. Television pictures appear to have an objective truth, even if editing and incompleteness can actually shade the larger story.

Challenges for U.S. Policy Like Arab governments, Washington cannot control either the images or the story presented on television. The propensity for wholly or slightly different messages to come out of the U.S. executive and legislative branches is always confusing to foreigners, and will probably never change. But U.S. officials must realize their messages are now directly reaching popular television audiences, not just Western-educated elites. Framing the U.S. message in light of these new developments and delivering it via officials with good spoken Arabic should go a long way to making sure the U.S. position on issues is well understood.

Simon Henderson, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is a former journalist with the Financial Times and now runs the business consultancy www.saudistrategies.com.

Policy #507
BRIEF ANALYSIS

A Strategy for Iraq: Guidelines for the Biden Administration

Jul 14, 2021

Jane Arraf, Joey Hood, Bilal Wahab

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Eviatar: What’s at Stake in the Struggle for Area C

Jul 14, 2021

Dany Tirza

TOPICS

Arab and Islamic Politics

STAY UP TO DATE

SIGN UP FOR EMAIL ALERTS
The Washington Institute seeks to advance a balanced and realistic understanding of American interests in the Middle East and to promote the policies that secure them.

The Institute is a 501(c)3 organization; all donations are tax-deductible.