

# The 'al-Jazeera Effect':

## Arab Satellite Television and Public Opinion

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### Brief Analysis

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 station's ability to inflame stretches across a whole gamut of subjects. Last year the United States was annoyed when the station broadcast the Arab world's 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 Doha's 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 Qatar's 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 world's 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 Arabia's 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 Abdal 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.

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