

Watching al-Jazeera

by Marc Lynch

The Arab satellite television station al-Jazeera is the enemy, or so we are told: “jihad TV,” “killers with cameras,” “the most powerful ally of terror in the world.” Shortly after 9/11, Fouad Ajami, distinguished professor of Near Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University, luridly described the station in an influential *New York Times Magazine* essay as a cesspool of anti-American hate that “deliberately fans the flames of Muslim outrage.” In June, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told attendees at an Asian defense conference that if they were to watch al-Jazeera day after day, “even if you were an American you would begin to believe that America was bad.” Even *Newsweek International’s* normally temperate Fareed Zakaria loses his composure when faced with al-Jazeera, which “fills its airwaves with crude appeals to Arab nationalism, anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and religious fundamentalism.” Denunciation of al-Jazeera is impressively bipartisan and a starting point for many of the post-9/11 debates over public diplomacy and the war of ideas in the Middle East.

This consensus is all the more remarkable given how few of the critics speak Arabic or have ever actually watched al-Jazeera. If they had, they might well arrive at a more nuanced judgment. They would certainly find some support for their disgust. Al-Jazeera may have never broadcast a beheading video, but it has shown many clips of terrified hostages begging for their lives. It airs lengthy statements by Osama bin Laden and invites extremists on its talk shows. Watching the Egyptian radical Tala’at Ramih rhapsodize over the beheading of Western hostages on one popular talk show, or Americans and Iraqi civilians die bloody deaths, as shown on raw video footage, or ex-Nazi David Duke discuss American politics at the station’s invitation, it’s easy to see why al-Jazeera is such a tempting target.

But these incendiary segments tell only half the story. Al-Jazeera is at the forefront of a revolution in Arab political culture, one whose effects have barely begun to be appreciated. Even as the station complicates the postwar reconstruction of Iraq and offers a platform for anti-American voices, it is providing an unprecedented forum for debate in the Arab world that is eviscerating the legitimacy of the Arab status quo and helping to build a radically new pluralist political culture.

The neoconservative *Weekly Standard’s* call for America to “find a way to overcome the al-Jazeera effect” gets things exactly wrong. The United States needs to find ways to work constructively with the “al-Jazeera effect.” The station is as



With an audience in the tens of millions, al-Jazeera is the largest of the new Arab broadcast media, mixing the familiar, such as Yasser Arafat in 2002, with the radically new.

witheringly critical of Arab regimes as it is opposed to certain pillars of American foreign policy. In its urgent desire to promote democracy and other reforms in the Arab world, al-Jazeera shares important aspirations with America. Though no friend of U.S. foreign policy, it is perhaps the single most powerful ally America can have in pursuit of the broad goal of democratic change in the Middle East. In the words of Egyptian dissident Saad al-Din Ibrahim, al-Jazeera has “done probably for the Arab world more than any organized critical movement could have done, in opening up the public space, in giving Arab citizens a newly found opportunity to assert themselves.”

Al-Jazeera was created in Qatar in late 1996 with financing from the country’s young emir and a staff largely drawn from a failed Saudi-British joint venture in satellite television. It was not the first transnational Arab television station. Within a few years of the 1991 Gulf War, a number of satellite television stations had gone on the air, filled with belly dancing, movies, and other forms of entertainment. These stations reached anybody in the Arab world who had a satellite dish or access to a café or other public place that showed satellite programs. Al-Jazeera’s innovation was to make open, contentious politics central to its transnational mission. Gone were the belly dancers and the sleepy interviews with deputy foreign ministers and B-list heads of state that had dominated Arab airwaves in the past. In their place came shockingly open and passionate political talk shows and highly professional, if sensational-

ist, news coverage focusing on the problems and issues of the Arab world.

The evolution of al-Jazeera and the Arab news media reached a turning point in December 1998 with Operation Desert Fox, the Anglo-American bombing campaign launched against Iraq on the accusation that Saddam Hussein was restricting access by UN weapons inspectors. It was the moment when al-Jazeera, the only television channel with cameras present on the ground at the time of the strikes, broke through to a mass audience. Al-Jazeera's graphic footage riveted Arab viewers and contributed to the massive anti-American protests that erupted across the region. The Palestinian al-Aqsa intifada, which broke out in September 2000, was another occasion to broadcast graphic images of intense combat from the ground level—and talk shows full of appeals for Arab action against Israel. That coverage consolidated al-Jazeera's centrality to Arab political life. During the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the station's exclusive position on the ground once again made its newscasts essential viewing. In these years, its estimated audience grew as large as some 50 million viewers, while its Arabic language website became one of the most popular destinations on the Internet.

But by early 2003, al-Jazeera had lost its monopoly on Arab satellite news. Rivals nipped at its heels: Lebanon's LBC and Future TV, Hizbollah's al-Manar, Abu Dhabi TV, Egypt's Dream TV. Al-Arabiya, launched in February 2003 with Saudi financing as a "moderate" (and pro-American) alternative, quickly emerged as a powerful competitor. The United States entered the fray a year later with its own government-run station: the well-funded but mostly ignored al-Hurra. In market surveys conducted in late 2004, the Arab Advisors Group found that 72 percent of Jordanians with satellite dishes watched al-Jazeera, while 54 percent tuned in to al-Arabiya and only 1.5 percent to al-Hurra. Egypt's market was more skewed, with 88 percent of dish-equipped Cairo residents watching al-Jazeera, 35 percent watching al-Arabiya, and five percent watching al-Hurra.

This intense competition has reduced whatever ability al-Jazeera once had to single-handedly shape opinion in the Arab world. It is still clearly the dominant satellite television station, more than first among equals, but it feels acutely the pressures of competition. The demands of Arab viewers, who tend to channel-surf and compare content, increasingly shape the broadcasting strategies of all Arab television stations. For example, despite his frequent denunciations of al-Jazeera's airing of hostage videos, al-Arabiya's director, Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed, has admitted that his station could abstain from airing hostage videos from Iraq only if al-Jazeera agreed to do likewise. Otherwise, his station would lose market share.

It is al-Jazeera's news broadcasts that have received most of America's attention. Critics have lashed out at the station's coverage of Iraq for exaggerating violence while ignoring positive developments there, for fomenting ethnic strife, for allegedly "collaborating" with insurgents and terrorists. Yet it was also the station's news coverage during the heady "Arab spring" of 2005 that led many to regard al-Jazeera more favorably. Such longtime critics as interim Iraqi prime minister Iyad Allawi and U.S. Secretary of State

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“Exclusive to al-Jazeera,” says the graphic in the upper right corner of this Osama bin Laden broadcast weeks after 9/11. Such images have won the station the enmity of many Americans.

Condoleezza Rice admitted that the station’s coverage of the Iraqi elections in January and the Lebanese protests in February over the murder of Rafik Hariri, the former prime minister who had defied his country’s Syrian occupiers, had aided the cause of reform.*

To focus only on al-Jazeera’s news programming, however, is to overlook the station’s most revolutionary aspect: its political talk shows. Consider al-Jazeera’s response to the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. During the invasion of Iraq, the station went to an all-news format. When Baghdad fell, it reshaped its prime-time programming, featuring the bare-bones talk show *Minbar al-Jazeera* (al-Jazeera’s Platform). In the very first postwar episode, the beautiful young Lebanese anchor Jumana al-Nimour faced the camera and asked, “Where is the Iraqi resistance? Why are the streets of Baghdad empty of Iraqi dead?” Then she opened the phones, and the voices of the Arab public poured forth. “Sister Jumana, you grieved over the fall of Baghdad, but I celebrated the fall of the tyranny. We hope that this tyrant is slaughtered

*In the documentary *Control Room* (2004), Lieutenant Colonel Josh Rushing (the American media liaison during Operation Iraqi Freedom) compared al-Jazeera’s selective approach to news coverage to that of Fox News. The comparison is alluring but of limited validity. It’s true that both appeal openly to a particular political identity—whether Arab or “red-state Republican.” Fox has covered the Iraq War, for example, by identifying with the U.S. military and presenting heartwarming stories about American troops, while al-Jazeera has identified with Arabs and emphasized the suffering and fear of the Iraqi people. Even on their respective talk shows there are similarities, in that guests are often drawn from the extremes of politics (which guarantees exciting arguments but obscures the existence of a vital middle ground). But the two inhabit very different media environments. Whereas Fox News began as an underdog and drew on a partisan audience, cultivated by conservative talk radio, to chip away at the dominance of the “mainstream media,” al-Jazeera emerged almost immediately as a near-dominant market leader. And while Fox News has benefited since 2000 from a close relationship with the dominant political party in the United States, al-Jazeera has remained isolated from the powers of the Arab world.

in the streets of Baghdad,” said one caller. Another warned, “I have a message from the Iraqi people. We will not be satisfied with an American occupation.” A Saudi caller worried that “the forces came to Iraq to protect the oil, and will abandon Iraq to civil war.” Another raged that “the issue is not

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the future of Iraq. It is the slaughter of Muslims and Arabs at the walls of Damascus, at the walls of Beirut, at the walls of Jerusalem, and now the slaughter of Muslims and Arabs at the walls of Baghdad.”

For weeks thereafter, as an audience of upward of 30 million looked on, al-Jazeera

opened the phone lines night after night, allowing Arabs from all over the world to talk about Iraq without scripts or rules or filters. The anguished, excited, angry, delirious discussions, in which Arabs struggled to make sense of events, constituted perhaps the most open and accessible public debate in Arab history. And they made for great television.

Al-Jazeera is playing a leading role in creating a new Arab public, and that public is visibly transforming Arab political culture. For decades, Arab public life was dominated by the dead hand of the state. The Arab news media resembled the desert: barren, boring, oppressive, repetitive, and (if not controlled by a national government) owned by the Saudis. In the evocative words of Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya, a “politics of silence” smothered the public life of the Arab world. Arab writers worked under the constant eye of the intelligence services, with, as one Jordanian journalist put it, “a policeman on my chest, a scissors in my brain.” The television programming of those days offered endless footage of dignitaries sitting on couches or shaking hands at airports; news broadcasts devoid of any substance; an incessant hammering on well-worn themes, such as the Israeli threat; love letters to the accomplishments of each country’s current great leader.

Al-Jazeera ushered in a new kind of open, contentious politics that delighted in shattering taboos. The names of its most popular talk shows suggest their distinctive combination of transgression and pluralism—*More Than One Opinion*, *No Limits*, *The Opposite Direction*, *Open Dialogue*. Al-Jazeera’s public defines itself in opposition to the status quo, against the glorification of kings and presidents and their sycophants. A program in the summer of 2003 asked viewers whether the current Arab regimes were worse than the old colonial regimes. Responding online, 76 percent of the respondents said yes. Nor does radical Islamism go unchallenged: When the station aired an exclusive video by al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri in June, it turned his monologue into a dialogue by inviting one of his leading Islamist critics and several liberals to respond point by point.

This past March, al-Jazeera broadcast a discussion with four leading

Arab intellectuals on the results of an online survey about the “priorities of the Arab street.” While Palestine predictably placed first in the poll, with 27 percent, “reform” was a very close second with 26 percent, followed by human rights at 11 percent and poverty at 10 percent. (The U.S. occupation of Iraq, terrorism, and Islamic extremism all failed to clear the 10 percent threshold.) Al-Jazeera then assembled panels of ordinary Arab citizens in Doha, Cairo, Rabat, and Beirut to debate the implications of the survey. Two months later, al-Arabiya copied al-Jazeera, airing a very similar program, with very similar results. Such programs are being noticed by more than their Arab viewers: Al-Arabiya’s survey ended up being widely discussed at May’s meeting of the World Economic Forum in Amman.

The new al-Jazeera-style openness has proved disconcerting to many. One guest stormed off the set after being challenged on Quranic interpretation by a Jordanian feminist. Another demanded that an exchange be edited out, only to be reminded—on the air—that the program was being broadcast live. In a June 2000 program, an Iraqi caller calmly told a guest from the Iraqi Foreign Ministry that “this unjust blockade imposed on our people has only one cause and that is Saddam Hussein.” Even the veteran American diplomat and fluent Arabic speaker Christopher Ross once admitted that he was “uncomfortable with the panel discussions and call-in talk shows” on al-Jazeera, preferring situations in which he could “remain in control.”

Arab regimes have complained endlessly of the indignities heaped on them by al-Jazeera’s guests. Jordan closed down al-Jazeera’s offices after an American academic ridiculed the Hashemite monarchy. Morocco did the same after its occupation of the Western Sahara was discussed on a talk show. The Algerian government allegedly cut power to the entire city of Algiers to prevent residents from watching a particularly incendiary discussion.

According to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, “The U.S. ouster of Saddam Hussein has triggered the first real ‘conversation’ about political reform in the Arab world in a long, long time. It’s still mostly in private, but more is now erupting in public.” Any regular viewer of al-Jazeera would find those remarks laughable. Long before George Bush took up the mantle of democratizing the Middle East, al-Jazeera routinely broadcast debates about political reform in the Arab world. In 1999 alone, the station aired talk show telecasts on “Arab Democracy between Two Generations,” “Democracy in the Arab World,” “Arab Participation in Israeli Elections,” “The Relationship between Rulers and the Ruled in Islam,” “The Misuse of States of Emergency in the Arab World,” “Human Rights in the Arab World,” and “Unleashing Freedom of Thought.” In 2002, only months before the invasion of Iraq, its programs included “Democracy and the Arab Reality,” “Reform and Referenda in the Arab World,” and (in a dig at the democratic trappings of Arab regimes) a mocking look at “99.99% Electoral Victories.”

Even on Iraq, that most contentious of topics, the stereotype of al-Jazeera as relentlessly pro-Saddam or anti-American is misleading. Here is what was said about Iraq on some of these programs during the Saddam years:

- December 1998: After condemning the Anglo-American bombing of

Iraq, the popular Islamist Sunni cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi turned his attention to Saddam Hussein: “We are against Saddam Hussein, but we are not against the Iraqi people. We consider the Iraqi regime a criminal and harmful regime for its people. . . . I call on the Iraqi president to allow freedoms inside of Iraq and to allow the Iraqi people a voice.”

• January 2000: After Iraqi foreign minister Mohammed al-Sahhaf claimed that Iraq had satisfied all the demands of the UN Security Council,

he was visibly brought up short by the curt response of anchor Jumana al-Nimour: “But this is not what the Security Council says.” When Sahhaf rejected a new round of weapons inspections, Nimour coolly responded, “If there are no weapons present, why are you afraid of an inspections team entering Iraq?” To be challenged and

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dismissed, and by a young woman no less, was not business as usual for a senior Iraqi official.

• August 2003: Faisal al-Qassem, host of *The Opposite Direction* and the most controversial media figure in the Arab world, faced the cameras framed by Abd al-Bari Atwan, the radical pan-Arab nationalist editor of the London-based daily newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi*, and Entifadh Qanbar, spokesman of Ahmed Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress. After posing a withering series of questions about the American presence in Iraq, Qassem suddenly reversed direction: “But after seeing the mass graves, isn’t it time for the Arabs to apologize to the Iraqi people for their silence over the years?” In the middle of the show, Qanbar dramatically pulled a pile of documents from his jacket that proved, he said, that various Arab politicians and journalists were on Saddam’s payroll.

• May 2004: On the first talk show after the revelation of sexual torture at the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Qassem raised a rather different issue: torture of Arabs by Arab governments in Arab prisons. His message could not have been clearer: Not everything is about America.

Al-Jazeera and its Arab television competitors are building a pluralist political culture in which all public issues are up for debate, and disagreement is not only permissible but expected. Its importance cannot be overstated, particularly since neither Islamist movements nor the existing autocratic Arab regimes—the two most powerful competing forces in the Arab world—offer a route to liberal reforms. And pro-American liberals in the region, however brave and eloquent, are, on their own, weak and marginal. Al-Jazeera offers them what American guns cannot: credibility, legitimacy, influence. When Ghassan bin Jadu, al-Jazeera’s Beirut bureau chief and host of *Open Dialogue*, sat down on-camera in December 2003 with the liberal Saad al-Din Ibrahim and the moderate Islamist Fahmy Huwaydi to discuss Ibrahim’s argument that Arab reformers should accept American support in



While al-Jazeera remains an important presence in the Arab world, it competes for its viewers' attention with a growing number of newspapers and other information sources.

their quest for significant political change, their conversation reached millions of Arab viewers.

Even as al-Jazeera cultivates a political culture of fierce public argument, a fundamental question arises: Is such a culture really a viable foundation for democracy? The spectacle of Arab politicians screaming at each other is not always edifying. Nor is the shattering of taboos necessarily constructive. In the fall of 2000, amid heady Arab mobilization in support of the Palestinian al-Aqsa intifada, *The Opposite Direction* host Qassem claimed that al-Jazeera had “succeeded in forming an Arab public opinion, probably for the first time in Arab history.” Less than three years later, he struck a more despondent note: “Why does nothing remain in the Arab arena except for some croaking media personalities? Why does a loud television clamor suffice as an alternative to effective action?”

Al-Jazeera’s politics of pluralism are interwoven with an equally potent politics of Arab identity. Protests in Egypt and Lebanon, elections in Iraq and Palestine, parliamentary disputes in Jordan or Kuwait, arrests of journalists in Tunisia and Algeria: Al-Jazeera covers all of these as part of a single, shared Arab story. This narrative binds Arabs together in an ongoing argument about issues on which all Arabs should have an opinion — though not the same opinion. This politics of identity is a great source of strength for al-Jazeera. But it also poses dangers. A frustrated identity politics can easily give way to demagoguery, to a populism of grievances large and small, to demands for conformity — to what American legal scholar Cass Sunstein calls “enclave deliberation,” which squeezes out the voices in the middle.

Whether populist, identity-driven but pluralist politics can be the foundation for liberal reforms is one of the most urgent problems facing the Arab world today.

What one enthusiast called “the Democratic Republic of al-Jazeera” does not, in fact, exist. Al-Jazeera cannot create democracy on its own, nor compel Arab leaders to change their ways. Television talk shows cannot substitute for the hard work of political organizing and institution building. Talk can become a mere substitute for action, and can even serve the interests of regimes intent on clinging to power.

The Kefaya (“Enough”) movement in Egypt is the quintessential expression of the new Arab public. This diverse coalition of oppositional movements—new Islamists, liberals, Nasserists, and Arabists—has demanded change from below and an end to the rule of President Hosni Mubarak. Its name and its narrative articulate the frustrations of the new Arab public: a

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restless, impatient call for an end to the exhausted, incompetent Arab order, and a fierce resentment of American foreign policy.

Members of Kefaya have worked expertly with al-Jazeera (where many of its leading figures have long been regular

guests). The first identifiable Kefaya protest—in March 2003, against the invasion of Iraq—turned into an unprecedented anti-Mubarak demonstration. Kefaya’s television-friendly protests, at first quite small, soon escalated into larger demonstrations. And the group’s arguments clearly resonated with the wider Arab public. Al-Jazeera’s polls show overwhelming rejection of the Mubarak regime’s self-serving “reforms,” and support for Kefaya’s impatient demands for change.

Kefaya’s fortunes demonstrate both the strength and the limitations of the new Arab public. The combination of a courageous and dedicated domestic social movement and the magnifying power of the new Arab media proved capable of transforming the political environment. But its limits were painfully apparent. The Egyptian regime soon learned the importance of barring al-Jazeera cameras from protest sites. Kefaya demonstrators faced continuing repression and harassment at the hands of security forces and regime thugs, most notably during the horrifying attacks on female protestors during the May 25 constitutional referendum. As the Egyptian state retrenched, the bubble of enthusiasm created by the Arab media’s coverage of Kefaya threatened to burst, leaving Arabs once again frustrated and furious.

How has America responded to this complex, transformative challenge in the Arab world? Poorly indeed.

After welcoming al-Jazeera in the years before 9/11 as a force challenging the sickly Arab status quo, American officials became so angry over the station’s coverage of al-Qaeda and the Afghanistan war that they stopped appearing on its programs—and thereby lost the opportunity to reach a vast audience. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and other prominent members of the Bush administration have frequently accused al-Jazeera of inciting violence against coalition forces and airing “atrocious” news coverage. Dorrance Smith,

a former senior media adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* earlier this year that “the collaboration between the terrorists and al-Jazeera is stronger than ever.”

Criticism is healthy, at least when it’s not simply an exercise in blaming the messenger. But Washington has gone beyond criticism. When the interim Iraqi government shuttered al-Jazeera’s Baghdad offices, for example, U.S. officials said not a word in protest. And the Bush administration has allegedly pressured the government of Qatar to close down, privatize, or censor al-Jazeera. The new Arab public sees such actions as prime examples of American hypocrisy. How can America credibly demand liberalization and democracy in the region when its first response to political criticism is censorship, pressure, and abuse?

The other principal U.S. response to al-Jazeera has been to create the Arabic-language satellite television station al-Hurra to get America’s message out in undiluted form. Though al-Hurra has been a dazzling success in terms of securing large budgets and building state-of-the-art facilities in northern Virginia, it has sunk with barely a trace in the intensely competitive Arab media environment. Few Arabs seem impressed with the quality of its news programs and talk shows, and the station has struggled to overcome the inevitable whiff of propaganda surrounding any government-run station. It has had little impact on either public opinion or the wider Arab political conversation.

A better American response would be to actively engage with al-Jazeera. One of the hidden costs of al-Hurra is that it sucks up the time and energies of American guests, official or not, who might otherwise be reaching far wider audiences on al-Jazeera. The United States should maintain a stable of attractive, fluently Arabic-speaking representatives, stationed in Doha and other Arab capitals, whose chief responsibility would be to appear on any Arab satellite television station that would have them. Even if they didn’t win every debate, their presence would force their Arab sparring partners to take American arguments into account. It would keep Arabs honest, while at the same time demonstrating to Arab audiences that America took them seriously and was willing to debate them on an equal footing.

For the new Arab public, the fundamental challenge today is not to shatter more taboos or ask more questions but to offer solutions. Al-Jazeera’s talk shows have given a forum to voices both moderate and extreme. The shows often err on the side of sensationalism and false oppositions, inviting conflict rather than reasonable compromise. In the short term, the station may well have strengthened anti-American sentiment in the region. But in a longer view, al-Jazeera is building the foundations of a pluralist political culture. By replacing stifling consensus with furious public arguments and secrecy with transparency, al-Jazeera and its Arab competitors are creating perhaps the most essential underpinning of liberal democracy: a free and open critical public space, independent of the state, where citizens can speak their piece and expect to be heard.

The world will continue to argue about whether the invasion of Iraq was necessary for the current democratic ferment in the Middle East. But al-Jazeera was most assuredly necessary. Shutting it down or muffling its voice might give Americans some short-term satisfaction, but to do either would also take away one of the most powerful weapons in the hands of Arab democratic reformers. □