

## Satellite Television, the War on Terror and Political Conflict in the Arab World

Lina Khatib

In Alan Ingram and Klaus Dodds, (Eds.), *Spaces of Security and Insecurity: Geographies of the War on Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), pp. 205-220.

The Arab world today is at a political crossroads. Continuing conflict in Iraq, tension in Lebanon, and intra-Palestinian rivalry threaten to destabilize the region. At the same time, foreign intervention in those conflicts shows no sign of decreasing, which is not surprising considering the international nature of politics in the Arab world. From the days of European mandates in the region, to the establishment of the state of Israel and subsequent Arab-Israeli wars, and on to Lebanese Civil War, the Palestinian intifada and the Gulf War, the Arab world has been host to a series of foreign interventions, both political and military. The so-called “war on terror” has only consolidated and intensified this intervention, so that the notion of geopolitics in the Middle East has come to take on a global, rather than a regional, dimension.

Over the last decade, satellite television has affirmed its place as the primary news medium in the region. The Gulf War was marked by the dominance of CNN, its images of smart weapons and precise bombs colonizing television screens worldwide. The establishment of al-Jazeera in 1996 was the Middle East’s first attempt at entering the world of 24-hour news channels. However, although al-Jazeera was a well-respected and relatively well-known channel in the Arab world at the time, it did not enjoy a primary position in people’s homes. It was the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 that made al-Jazeera a recognized brand in the region. Al-Jazeera devoted much of its broadcasting time to coverage of the intifada, presenting a clear pro-Palestinian stance towards the issue<sup>1</sup>. Zayani argues that in doing so, al-Jazeera set itself a political role in the Arab world:

Al Jazeera’s intense coverage of the intifada has not only fed Arab fury but also fostered anti-government behavior in the Arab world, making Arab governments vulnerable to charges and open to criticism that they have not sufficiently supported the Palestinians or decisively acted on the Palestinian cause. In this sense, Al Jazeera places itself as a counter-force to the official indifference towards the plight of the Palestinian people<sup>2</sup>.

At the same time, al-Jazeera’s coverage of the intifada marked a significant change in the Arab television landscape: the assertion of the primacy of the image as a means of political communication. Ayish notes that al-Jazeera “went one step further by showing live footage of clashes in Jerusalem between Palestinian stone throwers and heavily armed Israeli soldiers”<sup>3</sup>. Less than a year later, the events of September 11 consolidated the transformation of Arab satellite television into a visual-saturated medium. They also consolidated the role of Arab satellite television as an active political participant in the region, as opposed to a mere carrier of messages.

The “war on terror” contributed to the prominence of al-Jazeera in particular, and satellite television in general, in the Arab world. The events of September 11 were

constructed as a television landmark, dominating the screens of television channels in the Arab world and beyond. Jean Baudillard famously said that September 11 attacks were the “absolute event, the ‘mother event’, the pure event”<sup>4</sup>. The attacks gave birth to images that have carved a permanent space in the visual memory of people across the globe. The video tapes sent by al-Qaeda to al-Jazeera following the attacks form part of this visual memory. Al-Qaeda’s courting of al-Jazeera after September 11 is well documented, giving the station a worldwide notoriety and transforming it into a household name across the globe. Through the “war on terror”, satellite television in the Arab world grew in presence and impact, establishing itself as one of the most widely consumed media in the region.

In addition, in the decade or so since the “war on terror” started, satellite television in the Arab world has witnessed much contestation and competition. This decade has seen a proliferation of channels besides al-Jazeera—including non-Arab channels like al-Hurra—that form part of competing international public diplomacy efforts in the Arab world. Within this context, satellite television has moved from a medium seen as providing a space for political dialogue in the Arab world to a challenger to this very space. Satellite television in the region is not only a tool of communication. It is also a symptom and sometimes even a cause of power struggles in the Arab world. Power struggles in the region—especially in the post-September 11 era—are at once national, regional and global. The intra-Lebanese conflict that has consumed the country since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri for example cannot be examined and understood without thorough attention to the roles played by international agents, be they organizations (the United Nations and the Arab League) or states (Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, France, and the United States being the key players).

The various overlapping power struggles in the Arab world play an important role in shaping the visual and political economic television landscape in the region. Satellite television is firmly and actively embedded within this complex structure. On one hand, it attempts to challenge official political points of view. This is mostly seen in al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Iraq war, which challenges the American version of the events. On the other hand, it also engages in processes of political conflict by proxy, becoming a platform for rivalries between Arab countries, clashing “national” political groups, and international political agents. In doing so, satellite television acts as a mouthpiece for warring political factions. The roles that satellite television plays in the Arab world mean that Arab satellite television has become itself a political actor in the Middle East and beyond. In what follows, I will offer a critical assessment of this statement through a historically contextualized examination of satellite television’s position within national, regional and international political struggles affecting the Arab world.

### **The political economy of Arab satellite television**

The emergence of satellite television has created a nexus of power over the Arab television space by competing television stations. The nature of this competition has transformed the landscape of the Arab televisual media from being inherently national, to being regional or pan-Arab<sup>5</sup>. The Arab world’s first private satellite channel is MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center), which was launched in 1991 in London by the son-in-law of the Saudi King Fahd bin Abd Al-Aziz, and relocated to UAE in 2003<sup>6</sup>. A

number of other private satellite channels followed suit, such as ORBIT in 1994 and ART in 1995. Meanwhile, terrestrial television channels also started to broadcast on satellite, such as the Lebanese channels LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation) and Future Television, which launched their satellite channels in 1995. However, it was not until 1996 that a satellite channel fully dedicated to news was launched, and that was al-Jazeera. It started with 6 hours of broadcasting per day, and moved into 24-hour programming in February 1999<sup>7</sup>.

There are economic reasons for this regionalism as privately-owned satellite television stations seek consumers beyond the borders of the country they broadcast from. Economic aims have sometimes contributed to a change in the identity of television stations. The Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) for example started in 1986 as a channel aimed at the Francophone audience in Lebanon, relying on a relatively high usage of the French language and French programs in its broadcasts. This language use was partly political, as the channel was set up by factions belonging to the Maronite Lebanese Forces militia, whose target audience was primarily the Christian communities in Lebanon, particularly those who associated themselves culturally with France. In the post-Lebanese Civil War era, LBC has ceased to be an exclusive Lebanese Forces company and become a listed corporation with shares owned by diverse investors. As LBC's popularity in Lebanon grew, its use of the French language decreased as it attempted to appeal to a wider local audience.

However it was the launch of its satellite channel in the mid-1990s that characterized the toning down of the use of the French language in programs and by presenters and the increase in the Arabic language content of this satellite channel. This proved to be a successful business move, and LBC became the only Lebanese television channel actually generating a profit. In 2003, the Saudi Prince Al-Walid bin Talal bought 49% of the shares in this satellite channel<sup>8</sup>. This part ownership, along with the channel's targeting of wealthy consumers in Saudi Arabia through its programs, have also meant that its program content has been geared more towards this audience, with more material being aired that addresses the Saudi Kingdom in direct ways<sup>9</sup>. Other Arab satellite channels have followed a similar path, gearing their programs towards a wider pan-Arab audience<sup>10</sup>. With the Arab market, rather than the local markets, being the economic focus of most satellite television stations in the Arab world, satellite television has come to unite its viewers by constructing them as consumers. Consumption has become one category that binds Arab audiences together and hides their social antagonisms<sup>11</sup>.

### **Satellite television's promise of democracy**

However, if Arab audiences are "united" by being consumers, the political factors underlying their consumption of satellite television products present a paradox: at first glance, satellite television seems to offer a potential for the creation of a dialogic political sphere, where audiences get together in sharing a democratic space of expression. But a closer look reveals a more complex story. A decade and a half ago, when satellite television in the Arab world was still in its early stages, this development was hailed as a catalyst of social and political change in the region. Much was subsequently written about the role of satellite television in countering Western narratives about the region, and, with the rise of al-Jazeera, about the potential of this one television station to transform the

Arab political sphere<sup>12</sup>. This romanticism is understandable when considered in context of the many constraints on freedom of speech in the Arab world, and the fact that the majority of Arab countries at the time had previously had access only to the television stations owned by the states governing them. Ayish wrote in 1989 that political news on those channels was primarily concerned with reporting leaders' speeches, visits and activities, making their content dull and monolithic<sup>13</sup>. Arab audiences got used to, and learnt to ignore, those state channels that were pre-occupied with reporting the whereabouts of leaders while overlooking any sense of mass dissent. Whether it was President Assad of Syria, or Saddam Hussein of Iraq, the image of the leader was a prominent one, continuously relayed to the local audience, and packaged positively: those television stations presented the leaders as benevolent, patriotic and popular. The image of the leader on television was an indirect domination tool by the state, serving to "enforce obedience and induce complicity" in the people, and producing "belief in the regime's appropriateness"<sup>14</sup>.

With the exception of the constant presence of the image of leaders on Arab state television during this time, those television channels were notably rhetoric-heavy and light on visual representations. Muhammad Ayish points out that the news formats of state television "are characterized by serious and formal delivery methods that do not accommodate conversational approaches to news presentations. In this context, newscasters usually appear in an on-camera setting, with little consideration for television as a visual medium of communication"<sup>15</sup>. From 1996 onwards, this situation began to change. The dullness of those local television stations was overshadowed by the comparative sleekness of presentation and content on al-Jazeera. Those audience-attracting tactics drove state-owned television to follow similar patterns in using graphics and images<sup>16</sup>. The news as a visual form began to find its way into the living rooms of Arab households.

Al-Jazeera also challenged leader-centric news by relying on a mixture of reports, studio guests and critical analysis addressing a wide range of political and social issues in its news broadcasts. *The Economist* wrote in 2005 that satellite television is driving state-owned television to follow similar patterns in using more field reporting and less adulatory coverage of Arab leaders<sup>17</sup>. With al-Jazeera favoring heated talk shows over polished representations of political rulers, it was refreshing for Arab audiences to witness what they perceived to be "free" political debate and criticism on al-Jazeera. *The Opposite Direction*, one of the most popular talk shows on the channel, was a first in the Arab world for bringing guests who would be encouraged not only to disagree with each other, but to do it seemingly without restraint<sup>18</sup>.

Scholarly debate on satellite television in the Arab world has since become concerned with television's potential as a democratizing tool. Al-Hail<sup>19</sup> and Amin<sup>20</sup> have written that television strengthened civil society in the Arab world, while Marc Lynch argues that al-Jazeera is opening up a space for competing voices that encourages questioning the status quo in the region<sup>21</sup>. He also shares Jon Alterman's stance that Arab satellite television has created a sense of a shared Arab destiny<sup>22</sup>, saying that satellite television "has dramatically affected conceptions of Arab and Muslim identity, linking together geographically distant issues and placing them within a common Arab 'story'"<sup>23</sup>. In this sense, the debate follows the classical media development approach that was

prevalent in the 1980s and early 1990s. Vicky Randall's discussion back in 1993 of television in the Third World illustrates this point; she argued:

In so far as Third World leaders have attempted to create and impose their own 'political imaginary' upon their people, through a monopolistic control of the mass media, international media by providing alternative and conflicting sources of information have steadily sabotaged such a project<sup>24</sup>.

She goes on to praise the "international media's" positive role on democracy in the region.

But al-Jazeera's potential to play an active role in espousing political change in the region was limited. Not only was al-Jazeera itself banned from reporting from a number of Arab countries whose governments were less than happy with its criticism of their regimes, but al-Jazeera also operated within political structures that suffocated any potential of the media to translate rhetoric into action. The transformation of Arab television from lapdog to watchdog was only superficial. As Rami Khouri commented back in 2001,

Media activities in our region are still totally divorced from the political processes. An Arab viewer who might change his or her mind because of something they saw on television has no effective means of translating their views into political action or impact. For the political decision-making systems in most Arab countries are preconfigured to maintain a pro-government, centrist majority that allows more and more debate and discussion of important issues, but maintains real decision-making in the hands of small elite groups<sup>25</sup>.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of the intifada for example, graphic and supportive as it was, did not force any Arab government to change its stance towards the Palestinian problem. Nor did its criticism of various Arab regimes result in the stepping down of any rulers. If anything, the channel faced accusations of sensationalism and voyeurism, especially in its decision to air graphic images of the dead and wounded. However, al-Jazeera was to receive direct political accusations after September 11, when it became the medium of choice by Osama bin Laden whenever he wanted the world to see and listen to his pre-recorded video messages. Those charges came from the American administration that accused al-Jazeera of acting as a mouthpiece for and supporting al-Qaeda. The accusations led to the arrest of one of al-Jazeera's journalists, Taysir Alluni, on terrorism charges in Spain, the closing down of al-Jazeera's office in Iraq after the American invasion of the country, and the refusal by a number of American officials to grant interviews to al-Jazeera<sup>26</sup>. Al-Jazeera had been the only channel allowed into Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban, opening its office in Kabul in 2001<sup>27</sup>. As *The Economist* wrote, "[b]eing Arab and Muslim, its reporters gained privileged access to the losing side on the Afghan front", allowing the channel to broadcast a different perspective on the "war on terror" from the American channels<sup>28</sup>. Al-Jazeera's office was hit by an American bomb on November 12, 2001, with many of its workers believing that the hit was a deliberate attempt by the American administration at silencing the channel<sup>29</sup>. A subsequent hit on its office in Baghdad in 2003 only worked to emphasize this belief. The

“war on terror”, then, consolidated al-Jazeera’s position as a political actor in the Middle East with a role that extends beyond the immediate intra-Arab political sphere.

### **Satellite television as a political battlefield**

The “war on terror” also challenged the primacy of al-Jazeera in Arab satellite television 24-hour news. The invasion of Iraq proved to be the greatest catalyst. News of a looming war on Iraq led Saudi-owned MBC to launch its planned news channel early. Al-Arabiya began broadcasting on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2003. From the start, MBC has marketed al-Arabiya as an alternative to al-Jazeera. Before the channel’s launch, MBC had announced that al-Arabiya “will have a non-sensationalist approach and should be perceived by the Western world as more balanced than Al Jazeera”<sup>30</sup>. This stance continued after the war. Al-Arabiya’s director of operations Sam Barnett said in March 2004: “There was a perception that Arab media was dominated by Al-Jazeera and that they had a certain line that was populist, heading towards sensationalist, and that there was a gap for a more considered and less sensationalist approach”<sup>31</sup>. Al-Arabiya maintains this stance today. The channel celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2008. To commemorate the occasion, the channel launched a series of adverts titled “Al-Arabiya shook the world”, with its media relations manager Nasser Al-Sarami asserting al-Arabiya’s “loyalty to its neutral journalistic stance that does not feed on viewers’ instincts and emotions”<sup>32</sup>.

Marc Lynch argues that al-Arabiya initially imitated al-Jazeera in its coverage of the Iraq war in order to gain audiences<sup>33</sup>. However, in contrast to al-Jazeera’s clear anti-war stance, al-Arabiya chose to be more ambivalent during the early days of the war. Steve Tatham compares the coverage of the fall of the Saddam statue on 10 April 2003 on the two channels and shows a clear difference in stance towards this event. While al-Jazeera covered it with a degree of lament, al-Arabiya’s coverage was more hesitant. For example, al-Jazeera questioned whether the event was one of a “foreign invader chopping off another head? Does the world usually use this method to honour national martyrs?”<sup>34</sup>. Al-Arabiya on the other hand commented: “now we will know if the US was really after freeing the Iraqi people, or after Iraqi territory”<sup>35</sup>.

After the war, al-Arabiya changed its coverage into a more pro-American one “in order appeal both to the United States and to Arab elites threatened by al-Jazeera’s powerful critiques”<sup>36</sup>. The appointment of Abdul Rahman al-Rashed as Chief Editor in 2004 is often cited as the reason behind al-Arabiya’s change of stance; both *The Economist*<sup>37</sup> and Hugh Miles<sup>38</sup> for example explicitly refer to him as being “pro-American”. However it can be argued that this change in direction could be a response to heavy criticism by the American government of al-Arabiya’s early coverage of the Iraq war; Marc Lynch explains:

In July 2003, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz accused al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya of incitement to violence against coalition forces. In September 2003, Mustafa Barzani (then holding the rotating presidency of the IGC [Interim Governing Council]) ordered the closure of al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, and in December expelled al-Arabiya for two months for playing an audiotape from Saddam Hussein. In November, after the IGC raided al-Arabiya’s offices and

banned its broadcasts, Rumsfeld described al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya as ‘violently anti-coalition’ and claimed to have seen evidence that the Arab stations were cooperating with insurgents<sup>39</sup>.

This change in stance was visible on the screen. *The Economist* cites the coverage of the November 2004 marines offensive on Fallujah as an example of al-Arabiya’s divergent approach, compared with al-Jazeera:

While al-Jazeera focused on civilian deaths and heroic resistance, al-Arabiya pictured the storming of a terrorist haven. Before Iraq’s election, the Dubai channel broadcast saturation get-out-the-vote advertising, as well as a four-part exclusive interview with the interim prime minister, Iyad Allawi<sup>40</sup>.

This divergence led to a war of words between the two channels. Al Rashed defended al-Arabiya by saying “We attract liberal-minded people... Jazeera attracts fanatics”, while al-Jazeera’s news editor Ahmed al-Sheikh responded by saying that al-Arabiya is “losing legitimacy fast... We’ve got to uphold our principles”<sup>41</sup>.

But the battle between the two channels is not only driven by their competition in the media field. It has also been argued that both channels are affected by the respective governments of their financiers. While neither channel is a state-owned one, the reliance of al-Jazeera on the Emir of Qatar for funding and al-Arabiya’s being part of a network belonging to a relative of the Saudi royal family have had an impact on their relationship as well as on their content. In recent years, Qatar has started playing a more prominent role in Arab politics. As Zayani notes, “Qatar has exercised active diplomacy primarily by playing a mediating role in regional disputes”<sup>42</sup>. The state has for example participated in attempts at resolving the crisis in Sudan, and has offered to be a mediator in the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Zayani argues that al-Jazeera “fits in with Qatar’s attempt to play an active role in regional politics and to achieve regional influence”<sup>43</sup>. El-Oifi moreover argues that al-Jazeera’s pan-Arab identity serves the political aims of Qatar to forge a sense of pan-Arab belonging that nevertheless emphasizes a Qatari national one<sup>44</sup>; in doing so, Qatar has entered a political rivalry with Saudi Arabia, traditionally the leading Arab state in the Gulf that has the most influence over pan-Arab politics. This rivalry on the ground parallels that between the channels backed by the two countries<sup>45</sup>. The channels’ own coverage of Qatar and Saudi Arabia does little to dispel this theory. Al-Jazeera rarely criticizes the state of Qatar, while al-Arabiya is careful in its coverage of Saudi Arabia. In this sense, both channel seem to follow what Kraidy and Khalil call the “anywhere but here” stance, whereby “each channel takes the liberty to criticize all countries and policies except the country in which that channel is based or which finances its operations, and to focus on transnational issues to the detriment of local and national issues”<sup>46</sup>.

### **Satellite television and public diplomacy**

Despite their rivalry, al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya played an important role in the coverage of the Iraq war. The presence of those two channels during the war meant that the United States could no longer control the flow of images and information from Iraq,

as—despite their differences—the channels’ representations of the war highlighted different angles from those of the American media<sup>47</sup>. In particular, both channels highlighted the human dimension of the war that was often ignored in the Western media. The American government’s response to this was the launch of its own Pentagon-supported Arabic news satellite channel, al-Hurra. Al-Hurra was created with the purpose of presenting the American government’s point of view directly to the Arab audience, especially the Iraqi audience. It was established on the premise that al-Jazeera’s news in particular is too sensational and biased against the United States.

Penny Von Eschen writes that al-Hurra is an example of American “perception management” stemming from the United States’ take on people in the Middle East as duped and lacking political agency<sup>48</sup>. It is on this premise, and on the assumption of the universality of American modes of political communication, that the United States government conceived al-Hurra as a tool of political change in the Arab world<sup>49</sup>. The station’s name means “the free one”, and aims to send a message of fairness and objectivity to its intended audience, while also referencing the promise of “liberation” that the invasion of Iraq was supposed to bring about. Even the channel’s ident has been chosen to convey this sense of “liberty”. The ident, which runs on the screen periodically, shows a vast white landscape dominated by the image of multicolored horses running freely, again connoting the sense of freedom that the United States is supposed to bring the Arab world through its foreign policies. Al-Hurra also presents the American point of view in its coverage of events in the Middle East. The iconic moment of the destruction of Saddam’s statue in Baghdad in 2003 was framed by al-Hurra as one of liberation, in sharp contrast to the stance taken by al-Jazeera, where it framed the event as within a war *on Iraq*<sup>50</sup>. However al-Hurra has failed in its mission and is one of the least watched and trusted satellite stations in the Arab world<sup>51</sup>. Al-Hurra has failed in challenging the position of al-Jazeera, or in convincing Arab audiences that it is a credible source of information. Consequently, the United States government is now seeking less overt methods of public diplomacy in the Middle East.

But al-Hurra set a precedent. The use of satellite television to communicate to and from the Arab world has since evolved with the recognition of the need to reach out to audiences beyond one’s own. In 2004, Iran launched al-Alam, an Arabic-language news channel aimed at its neighboring audiences. In 2007, Russia launched another Arabic-language station, Rusiya al-Yaum, to present its own point of view to those same audiences<sup>52</sup>. The BBC has also created an Arabic-language television station which is backed by the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The FCO’s involvement in the affairs of the BBC is often downplayed, but the creation of the Arabic language channel is part of the UK government’s public diplomacy efforts in the Arab world. In contrast, in 2007 al-Jazeera launched an English-language channel, al-Jazeera International. Al-Jazeera International’s content is differently selected, framed, and presented from that of its Arabic counterpart as it is geared towards Western and English-speaking Asian audiences.

The presence of those channels is indicative of the international nature of geopolitics in the Middle East. Key political players from within and outside the region are vying for space in the Arab televisual landscape. At the same time, the launch of al-Jazeera International is an example of this process in reverse. As argued earlier, the state of Qatar is playing an increasing role in politics in the Middle East, but it also presents



itself to the West as a political mediator. Its membership of the Security Council, donations to rebuild villages in the Lebanese South after the 2006 war, and involvement in local Palestinian politics attest to its ambitions in the international political arena, since all those conflicts are not limited to their geographical locality. If we are to accept Qatar's influence on al-Jazeera, it would not be surprising for Qatar to seek to indirectly present a favorable image of itself through al-Jazeera International. This is not done through representing Qatar on the screen; it is the mere positive association between Qatar and a channel that has recruited high-profile journalists (including Western ones), relies on glossy images and uses moderate language in its reporting that can be seen to have a favorable impact on Qatar's reputation.

The accelerated launch of Al-Arabiya and the mushrooming of television stations aimed at the Arab world is indicative of the primacy of the image in the age of the "war on terror". September 11 was a highly visual event. It marked a change in the global television landscape, and even in geopolitical war tactics. It confirmed the power of the image, and the impact of staging events for the camera. Although the invasion of Iraq carried less iconic images than those of September 11, it is still remembered in visual terms. The destruction of the statue of Saddam in Baghdad; the capture of Saddam Hussein in a hole; and the Abu Ghraib photographs are memorable visual moments in the war. The Iraq war has proven that contemporary warfare is incomplete with a comprehensive information management strategy that takes into consideration the role of images in general, and satellite television in specific. Geopolitics today is *seen*.

### **The internationalization of local conflict**

Satellite television in the Arab world does not only engage in global geopolitics. It has also taken local political conflicts and given them a regional, and even international, platform. Several satellite television stations remain the satellite versions of state-owned ones (stations from Egypt, Sudan, and several other Arab countries fall into this category), broadcasting the official ideology of the state to the world. In Lebanon, where television stations remain in the hands of competing political actors, satellite television stations are another way for those actors to air their ideologies to an audience beyond the national one. In this way, satellite television is complicit in political clashes in the region.

Lebanon presents perhaps the clearest example of the role of satellite television as a participant in political conflict. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, Lebanese satellite television stations were divided into an anti-Syrian (Future TV, LBC) and a pro-Syrian (Al-Manar, NBN, New TV) camp. The stations in the first camp are owned by the family of Rafic Hariri himself in the case of Future TV, and, in the case of LBC, partly by those affiliated with the Maronite Kataeb and Lebanese Forces parties—all of which have formed the pro-government "14 March coalition". The stations in the second camp are owned by Hizbullah (Al-Manar), Hizbullah's ally Shiite group Amal (NBN), and a rival of Hariri's (New TV). Along with the Free Patriotic Movement political party led by General Michel Aoun, the latter groups formed the anti-government "8 March coalition". Thus, the clashing television stations represented the agendas of the political parties clashing on the ground<sup>53</sup>. Both camps have been engaging in a televised battle of legitimacy, using political events to appeal to the Lebanese people, while also defending their positions vis-à-vis the wider Arab

audience. For example, the camps have engaged in a battle over who is the “true” representative of “all” the Lebanese people. The stations in the anti-Syrian camp have constructed the Hariri assassination as an event concerning all Lebanese, its resolution being a victory for the Lebanese people and their sovereignty. On the other hand, NBN and Al-Manar have chosen to focus on another event that they present as being for the Lebanese people: Hizbullah’s self-declared “victory” in the July 2006 war is constructed as one for all the Lebanese, not just Lebanon’s Shiites. Those events are still being used with equivalent force today, almost three years after Hariri’s assassination, and almost two years since the July war. By using those events to appeal to the Lebanese people as a whole, the events become an example of how “[t]he past plays an authenticating and legitimizing role”<sup>54</sup>. Through satellite television, this conflict is being played out not only in the local arena, but also in the regional and international ones.

Both camps have relied on different symbols and visual codes in their appeal to audiences. Al-Manar alternates between regular images of devastation from the 2006 war and pride in Hizbullah’s “victory”, with the images becoming a visual signifier of the need for the maintenance of Hizbullah as a military organization that serves a “defensive” role in Lebanon. Ever since the day of Hariri’s assassination, Future Television has carried an on-screen counter that tallies the number of days since the assassination. The counter—present throughout Future TV’s transmission period—serves as a constant reminder of the need to resolve the mystery of his death. Foucault has famously argued that memory is “a very important factor in struggle... if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism”<sup>55</sup>. Through this battle over memory, both stations can then be seen as attempting to exercise control over the Lebanese and Arab audiences, affirming the channels as mouthpieces of the political actors who own them.

In 2007, another Lebanese political group joined in the satellite television battle. The Free Patriotic Movement launched Orange Television (OTV) in Autumn 2007. The Free Patriotic Movement’s alliance with Hizbullah revolves around lobbying for Aoun to become president of Lebanon as well as maintaining Hizbullah as a paramilitary group in Lebanon. OTV started airing in the period leading up to the Lebanese presidential elections that were supposed to take place in November 2007. The use of visual codes to transmit political messages is at the heart of OTV, with the station’s name being that of the signature color of the Free Patriotic Movement. The urgency of the creation of OTV stems from the fragmentation of the media space in Lebanon, where if a political party does not own a television station, its views are marginalized. This is because there is no space in the Arab television landscape where views are given an equal share. All satellite news channels seem to advocate one political stance at the expense of the other.

### **Politics as consumption**

The importance of the diverse voices presented by Arab satellite television stations cannot be denied, and does form a refreshing change from the uniformity of public discourse the Arab audiences had been exposed to in the days before satellite television. Moreover, their challenge to the dominance of American news cannot be denied. All Arab satellite channels have been involved in covering the Iraq war, and despite their differences, they have all presented a degree of criticism of American actions on Arab soil that far exceeds that on American television. Adel Iskandar for

example notes how Fox News Channel's coverage of the invasion of Iraq contained "little to no footage of civilian casualties... and infrastructural damage in Iraq was shown primarily via long-distance footage... with voiceover military reports proclaiming accuracy in striking strategic targets"<sup>56</sup>. It was the Arab television stations that first showed the impact of the war on the Iraqi people. A similar situation occurred with the July 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah, where the scale of the human and infrastructural tragedies in Lebanon caused by the war found a voice primarily in the Arab media.

However, the existence of any kind of real political dialogue through Arab television stations remains unattained. Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya often present different versions of the same events that are indicative of their clashing political stances. For example, during the July 2006 war, al-Arabiya identified Hizbullah as a "Lebanese Shiite" group, whereas al-Jazeera simply referred to it as a "Lebanese" group, thereby creating clear, clashing frameworks of (il)legitimacy surrounding Hizbullah's actions and motives in the war. Competing stations closely monitor and respond to each other, but do so to discredit the other, rather than engage with them. An example is al-Manar's coverage of the street riots that took place in Lebanon in January 2007, where the station often began its broadcasts by quoting the news reports of Future Television and then branding them lies. News coverage thus has become an exercise in political strategy.

In this nurturing context, it is not surprising that outside political actors involved in Arab politics have jumped on the bandwagon of using television as a mouthpiece to address the Arab world. The presence of al-Jazeera International as well as Iranian, British, Russian and American satellite television stations broadcasting in Arabic has complicated what is meant by "Arab" satellite television, and confirmed television's role as a participant in political conflict. But even in the case of satellite television stations owned by Arabs that broadcast in Arabic, the situation is complex. The Arab satellite television landscape is one of contention, a symptom of power struggles within the Arab world and between it and outside forces. As long as satellite television stations engaged in news reporting act as mouthpieces for clashing political actors whose primary motive is the propagation of messages favorable to the Self, a real engagement in political dialogue through television in the Arab world will be difficult. Instead, what we get is the transformation of politics into a commodity, where *citizens* "are turned into consumers"<sup>57</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Zayani, Mohamed (2005b). "Witnessing the Intifada: Al Jazeera's Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict". In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 171-182. London: Pluto Press.

<sup>2</sup> Zayani, "Witnessing the Intifada", p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Ayish, Muhammad I. (2002). "Political Communication on Arab World Television: Evolving Patterns". *Political Communication*, 19, p149.

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (2002). "L'Esprit du Terrorisme". *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(2), p. 403.

---

<sup>5</sup> Sakr, Naomi (2002). *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*. London: IB Tauris; Sakr, Naomi (2007). *Arab Television Today*. London: IB Tauris.

<sup>6</sup> Kraidy, Marwan and Khalil, Joe (2007). "The Middle East: Transnational Arab Television". In Artz, Lee and Yahya R. Kamalipour (Eds.), *The Media Globe: Trends in International Mass Media*, pp. 79-08. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>7</sup> Ayish, "Political Communication on Arab World Television".

<sup>8</sup> *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* (2004). "Satellite Chronicles: November 2003 to April 2004". Issue 12 (Spring/Summer) [Online]. Available: <http://www.tbsjournal.com/chronicles.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Kraidy, Marwan (2006). "Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World: Preliminary Observations". *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, 2(1): 7-28.

<sup>10</sup> Khatib, Lina (2006). "Language, Nationalism, and Power: A Case Study of Arab Reality TV Show *Star Academy*". *Southern Review: Communication, Politics and Culture*, 39(1): 25-41.

<sup>11</sup> O'Shaughnessy, Michael (1990). "Box Pop: Popular Television and Hegemony". In Goodwin Andrew and Garry Whannel (Eds.), *Understanding Television*, pp. 88-102. London: Routledge.

<sup>12</sup> El-Nawaway, Mohamed and Iskandar, Adel (2003). *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network that is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

<sup>13</sup> Ayish, Muhammad I. (1989). "Newsfilm in Jordan Television's Arabic Nightly Newscasts". *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 33, pp. 453-460.

<sup>14</sup> Weeden, Lisa (1999). *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Ayish, "Political Communication on Arab World Television", p. 140.

<sup>16</sup> *The Economist* (2005). "The World through their Eyes", 26 February 2005, pp. 23-25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Kasim, Faisal (2005). "The Opposite Direction: A Program which Changed the Face of Arab Television". In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 93-105. London: Pluto Press.

- 
- <sup>19</sup> Al-Hail, Ali (2000). "The Age of New Media: The Role of Al-Jazeera Satellite TV in Developing Aspects of Civil Society in Qatar". *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, issue 4 (Spring) [Online]. Available:  
<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring00/Articles4/Ali/Al-Hail/al-hail.html>
- <sup>20</sup> Amin, Hussein (2000). "Satellite Broadcasting and Civil Society in the Middle East: The Role of NileSat". *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, issue 4 (Spring) [Online]. Available:  
<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring00/Articles4/Ali/Amin/amin.html>
- <sup>21</sup> Lynch, Marc (2006). *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- <sup>22</sup> Alterman, Jon (1999). "Transnational Media and Social Change in the Arab World". *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, issue 2 (Spring) [Online]. Available:  
<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring99/Articles/Alterman/alterman.html>
- <sup>23</sup> Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*, p. 4
- <sup>24</sup> Randall, Vicky (1993). "The Media and Democratisation in the Third World". *Third World Quarterly*, 14(3), p. 635.
- <sup>25</sup> Quoted in Campagna, Joel (2001). "Arab TV's Mixed Signals". *Foreign Policy*, number 127 (Nov.-Dec.), p. 89.
- <sup>26</sup> Miles, Hugh (2005). *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*. London: Abacus.
- <sup>27</sup> Tatham, Steve (2006). *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds: The Coalition, Al-Jazeera and Muslim Public Opinion*. London: Hurst and Company.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Economist*, "The World through their Eyes", p. 24
- <sup>29</sup> Bessaiso, Ehab Y. (2005). "Al Jazeera and the War in Afghanistan: A Delivery System or a Mouthpiece?". In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 153-170. London: Pluto Press.
- <sup>30</sup> Postlewaite, Susan (2003). "Al Jazeera Rival Hits Middle East". *Advertising Age*, 3 February 2003, 74(5), p.1.
- <sup>31</sup> Quoted in Tatham, *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds*, p. 74.
- <sup>32</sup> Quoted in Nayouf, Hayan (2008). "Al-Arabiya begins its sixth year with a new look and 'news as big as the event'". *Al-Arabiya website*, 19 February 2008. Available:  
<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/02/19/45858.html>

- 
- <sup>33</sup> Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*.
- <sup>34</sup> Al-Jazeera broadcast, quoted in Tatham, *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds*, p. 138.
- <sup>35</sup> Al-Arabiya broadcast, quoted in Tatham *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds*, p. 139.
- <sup>36</sup> Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*, p. 23.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Economist*, "The World through their Eyes".
- <sup>38</sup> Miles, *Al-Jazeera*.
- <sup>39</sup> Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*, pp. 213-214.
- <sup>40</sup> *The Economist*, "The World through their Eyes", p. 25.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Zayani, Mohamed (2005a). "Introduction—Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes of the New Arab Mediascape". In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*. London: Pluto Press, p. 13.
- <sup>43</sup> Zayani, "Introduction", p. 12.
- <sup>44</sup> El Oifi, Mohammed (2005). "Influence without Power: Al Jazeera and the Arab Public Sphere". In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 66-79. London: Pluto Press.
- <sup>45</sup> Fandy, Mamoun (2007). *(Un)Civil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International
- <sup>46</sup> Kraidy and Khalil, "The Middle East", p. 81.
- <sup>47</sup> Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*.
- <sup>48</sup> Von Eschen (2005). "Enduring Public Diplomacy". *American Quarterly*, 57(2): 335-343.
- <sup>49</sup> Patiz, Norman (2004). "Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV: Opening Channels of Mass Communication in the Middle East". In Rugh, William (ed.), *Engaging the Arab and Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy: A Report and Action Recommendations*, pp. 69-89. Washington D.C.: Public Diplomacy Council.
- <sup>50</sup> Zayani, Mohamed and Muhammad I. Ayish (2006). "Arab Satellite Television and Crisis Reporting: Covering the Fall of Baghdad". *International Communication Gazette*, (October), 68(5-6): 473-479.

---

<sup>51</sup> Braizat, Fares (2005). *Revisiting the Arab Street*. Amman: Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan [E-book]. Available:  
<http://www.jcss.org/SubDefault.aspx?PageId=55&PubType=1>

<sup>52</sup> Reuters (2007). "Russia launches Arabic TV news channel". *Khaleej Times Online*, 4 May 2007. Available:  
[http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/theworld/2007/May/the\\_world\\_May117.xml&section=theworld](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/theworld/2007/May/the_world_May117.xml&section=theworld)

<sup>53</sup> Khatib, Lina (2007). Television and Public Action in the Beirut Spring. In Sakr, Naomi (ed.), *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life*, pp. 28-43. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>54</sup> Suleiman, Yasir (2003). *The Arabic Language and National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 38.

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, Michel (1975). "Interview: Film and Popular Memory". *Radical Philosophy*, (Summer), issue 11 (Summer), p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Iskandar, Adel (2005). "'The Great American Bubble': Fox News Channel, the 'Mirage' of Objectivity, and the Isolation of American Public Opinion". In Artz, Lee and Yayha R. Kamalipour (Eds.), *Bring 'Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War*. Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield, p. 162.

<sup>57</sup> Silverstone, Roger (1994). *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge, p. 110.

## References

Al-Hail, Ali (2000). The Age of New Media: The Role of Al-Jazeera Satellite TV in Developing Aspects of Civil Society in Qatar. *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, issue 4 (Spring) [Online]. Available:  
<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring00/Articles4/Al/Hail/al-hail.html>

Al-Kasim, Faisal (2005). *The Opposite Direction: A Program which Changed the Face of Arab Television*. In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 93-105. London: Pluto Press.

Alterman, Jon (1999). Transnational Media and Social Change in the Arab World. *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, issue 2 (Spring) [Online]. Available:  
<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring99/Articles/Alterman/alterman.html>

Amin, Hussein (2000). Satellite Broadcasting and Civil Society in the Middle East: The Role of Nilesat. *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, issue 4 (Spring) [Online]. Available:  
<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring00/Articles4/Al/Amin/amin.html>

- 
- Ayish, Muhammad I. (1989). Newsfilm in Jordan Television's Arabic Nightly Newscasts. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 33, pp. 453-460.
- Ayish, Muhammad I. (2002). Political Communication on Arab World Television: Evolving Patterns. *Political Communication*, 19, pp. 137-154.
- Baudrillard, Jean (2002). L'Esprit du Terrorisme. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(2): 403-415.
- Bessaio, Ehab Y. (2005). Al Jazeera and the War in Afghanistan: A Delivery System or a Mouthpiece? In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 153-170. London: Pluto Press.
- Braizat, Fares (2005). *Revisiting the Arab Street*. Amman: Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan [E-book]. Available:  
<http://www.jcss.org/SubDefault.aspx?PageId=55&PubType=1>
- Campagna, Joel (2001). Arab TV's Mixed Signals. *Foreign Policy*, number 127 (Nov.-Dec.), pp. 88-89.
- The Economist* (2005). The World through their Eyes, 26 February 2005, pp. 23-25.
- El-Nawaway, Mohamed and Iskandar, Adel (2003). *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network that is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.
- El Oifi, Mohammed (2005). Influence without Power: Al Jazeera and the Arab Public Sphere. In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 66-79. London: Pluto Press.
- Fandy, Mamoun (2007). *(Un)Civil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International
- Foucault, Michel (1975). Interview: Film and Popular Memory. *Radical Philosophy*, Summer 1975, issue 11, p. 24-29.
- Iskandar, Adel (2005). "The Great American Bubble": Fox News Channel, the "Mirage" of Objectivity, and the Isolation of American Public Opinion. In Artz, Lee and Yayha R. Kamalipour (Eds.), *Bring 'Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War*, pp. 155-174. Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield.
- Khatib, Lina (2006). Language, Nationalism, and Power: A Case Study of Arab Reality TV Show *Star Academy*. *Southern Review: Communication, Politics and Culture*, 39(1): 25-41.



---

Khatib, Lina (2007). Television and Public Action in the Beirut Spring. In Sakr, Naomi (ed.), *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life*, pp. 28-43. London: I.B. Tauris.

Kraidy, Marwan (2006). Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World: Preliminary Observations. *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, 2(1): 7-28.

Kraidy, Marwan and Khalil, Joe (2007). The Middle East: Transnational Arab Television. In Artz, Lee and Yahya R. Kamalipour (Eds.), *The Media Globe: Trends in International Mass Media*, pp. 79-98. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Lynch, Marc (2006). *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Miles, Hugh (2005). *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*. London: Abacus.

Nayouf, Hayan (2008). Al-Arabiya begins its sixth year with a new look and “news as big as the event”. *Al-Arabiya website*, 19 February 2008. Available: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/02/19/45858.html>

O'Shaughnessay, Michael (1990). Box Pop: Popular Television and Hegemony. In Goodwin Andrew and Garry Whannel (Eds.), *Understanding Television*, pp. 88-102. London: Routledge.

Patiz, Norman (2004). Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV: Opening Channels of Mass Communication in the Middle East. In Rugh, William (ed.), *Engaging the Arab and Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy: A Report and Action Recommendations*, pp. 69-89. Washington D.C.: Public Diplomacy Council.

Postlewaite, Susan (2003). Al Jazeera Rival Hits Middle East. *Advertising Age*, 3 February 2003, 74(5): 1.

Randall, Vicky (1993). The Media and Democratisation in the Third World. *Third World Quarterly*, 14(3): 625-646.

Reuters (2007). Russia launches Arabic TV news channel. *Khaleej Times Online*, 4 May 2007. Available: [http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/theworld/2007/May/the\\_world\\_May117.xml&section=theworld](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/theworld/2007/May/the_world_May117.xml&section=theworld)

Sakr, Naomi (2002). *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*. London: IB Tauris.

---

Sakr, Naomi (2007). *Arab Television Today*. London: IB Tauris.

Silverstone, Roger (1994). *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.

Suleiman, Yasir (2003). *The Arabic Language and National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Tatham, Steve (2006). *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds: The Coalition, Al-Jazeera and Muslim Public Opinion*. London: Hurst and Company.

*Transnational Broadcasting Studies* (2004). Satellite Chronicles: November 2003 to April 2004. Issue 12 (Spring/Summer) [Online]. Available: <http://www.tbsjournal.com/chronicles.htm>

Von Eschen (2005). Enduring Public Diplomacy. *American Quarterly*, 57(2): 335-343.

Weeden, Lisa (1999). *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Zayani, Mohamed (2005a). Introduction—Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes of the New Arab Mediascape. In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 1-46 London: Pluto Press.

Zayani, Mohamed (2005b). Witnessing the Intifada: Al Jazeera's Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict. In Zayani, Mohamed (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, pp. 171-182. London: Pluto Press.

Zayani, Mohamed and Muhammad I. Ayish (2006). Arab Satellite Television and Crisis Reporting: Covering the Fall of Baghdad. *International Communication Gazette*, (October) 68(5-6): 473-479.