

The Arab Media Coverage of the Iraqi War:

The Challenge of the New Arab Media

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Based on Paper Presented at the Seminar: Reporting the War in Iraq

Caucasus Media Institute, Yerevan, April 10, 2003

In case there is a winner in the global media competition in covering the second Gulf war (1991) was CNN, the winner of the third (current) Gulf war is clearly the pan-Arab television network al-Jazeera. The Arab media never had such global outreach: al-Jazeera, again took the lead of the global war reporting. Again, after its domination in covering the war in Afghanistan, through its presence in Taliban dominated regions, and through its constant broadcasting of the latest video recordings of the most researched man on the planet Ousama bin Laden. A new generation of Arab televisions, and a new generation of young journalists are expressing courage in reporting their environment, unseen before.

Al-Jazeera showed footage of the Iraqi civilian victims, of US prisoners of war, filmed from inside Basra and Mosul. Its footage was re-broadcasted all over the world, and its logo was seen all over the place. Al-Jazeera reporting irritates in the east and in the west. US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld criticized the airing of the US POW's on al-Jazeera, saying it is against the Geneva conventions. British Prime Minister expressed his "horror" at al-Jazeera after it broadcasted pictures of dead soldiers.¹ British military sources repeatedly insisted that a kind of uprising was taking place within besieged Basra, al-Jazeera reported from inside Iraq's second city that its streets were calm. In Arab countries, not everyone is in love with their reporting: since long its offices in Kuwait are shut-down, whiel some Kuwaiti papers write that talking about "aggression against Iraq" is equivalent to taking "a pro-Iraqi position".² In a word, al-Jazeera, with a number of other, lesser known Arab satellite channels (such as Abou Dhabi TV, Al-Arabiya, LBC) have succeeded in challenging the official American version of the war, and could become an alternative voice to the dominant Anglo-American channels. Was it by chance that the TV channels Baghdad office was hit, just like its office in Kabul, by US planes?³

¹ Reported by *The Guardian*, London, March 27, 2003. See on the internet:

<http://media.guardian.co.uk/broadcast/story/0,7493,922884,00.html>

and by *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, London, 28 March, 2003, page 2.

² *Al-Qabas*, Kuwait, April 8, 2003.

³ Al-Jazeera accused the US military of targeting its Kabul office. See *The Guardian*, London, 17 November, 2001, on the internet: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/waronterror/story/0,1361,596410,00.html>. The Baghdad office of al-Jazeera and Abou Dhabi (another pan-Arab TV network) were hit on April 8, 2003, where al-Jazeera correspondent Tareq Ayoub was killed.

The challenge of the new Arab media is not restricted to images, but also touches interpretation. The Doha based al-Jazeera, which was launched in 1996, did not restrict itself to showing footage that defies the official lines of the Pentagon: by showing hard footage of wounded children, mass destruction of property, interviewing with Iraqi generals supposedly killed in coalition bombing, al-Jazeera revealed the other-side of “smart-bombing” and the presumption of low victim (or no-victim) war. In other words, by reporting the war through its lenses, the Qatari channel challenged the official American narrative of the war. Moreover, those images come with a position. The channel calls the war “illegitimate”, broadcasts a number of interviews to explain how after the start of the war, and in spite of predictions that the price of oil barrel will shoot up to 80 USD, instead it witnessed a sharp decline? And gives the answer: Saudi Arabia is pumping oil at its maximum capacity, between 8-9 million barrels per day.⁴ On the day of the fall of the Ba’ist regime in Baghdad, the channel titles its news: “End of Saddams rule... and Baghdad under occupation”.⁵

This image seen by the rest of the world is contrasted by what most Arab populations are used to receive from their traditional media sources. Most Arab newspapers, news agencies, radio and televised broadcasts are usually limited between receiving news and images from foreign sources, or reflect the positions of their own leadership, with very little margin of dissent, or not at all. The Arab media in general lacks an overall voice – a space now being filled by al-Jazeera and other satellite channels. The print press is divided between national publications reflecting to a high degree the official viewpoint, while the most interesting publications in exile in London, such as *al-Hayat*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, or *al-Quds al-Arabi*, reflect certain political loyalty, or financial interests. Some examples: Kuwaiti media completely supported coalition positions, putting the blame of the war on the Iraqi regime, and considering the war an act of liberation.⁶ Egyptian mainstream daily *al-Ahram*, in its turn, reflects the ambiguous position of the Mubarak leadership: opposing the war, at the same time defending official Egyptian leadership from criticism concerning their collaboration with US forces (Suez channel open to US navy vessels). “The Arab *Oumma* should not surrender to this war... but to do everything possible ... to reinforce the global criticism to the American aggression against Iraq”, reads an editorial of *al-Ahram*.⁷ And in Syria official papers such as *al-Thawra* criticize the war, and reflect concern about declarations coming from Washington and accusing Syria of militarily supporting Iraq.

The Legality of War:

Few authors in the Arab media doubt about the legality of this war. On the eve of the war, the liberal, London based al-Hayat in a column compares US marginalization of the UN, with that of German marginalization of the League of Nations.⁸ The Lebanese al-Safeer titles its March 26 editorial “The war of total destruction”, and *al-Ahram*, on March 27 news analysis considers the current war the continuation of that of 1991. This time the objectives of the war are “to get rid of the regime of Saddam Husein, impose an open military occupation, and then compose a collaborating government on the model of Afghanistan”⁹. And why the war? The

⁴ See al-Jazeera report “Saudi plan to transport huge quantities of oil to America” posted on 14 March, 2003: <http://www.aljazeera.net/economics/2003/3/3-14-6.htm>, and “What is the role of Saudi oil in the war on Iraq?” posted on April 2, 2003: <http://www.aljazeera.net/economics/2003/4/4-2-1.htm>, which is an interview with Mouhammad Abd al-A’ati

⁵ News posted on April 10, 2003, at <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2003/4/4-10-5.htm>

⁶ *Al-Qabas* newspaper titles its issue of April 10, 2003 with Kuwaiti foreign minister Sabah’ al-Ah’mad saying “Joy fills our hearts with the liberation of Iraq”, <http://www.alqabas.com.kw/newsprintpage.php?id=24635>

⁷ “Our right to blood and disputes”, *al-Ahram*, Cairo, April 8, 2003.

⁸ Dawood al-Sheryan, *al-Hayat*, London, March 19, 2003.

⁹ Mouhammad al-Sa’dani, “The war against Iraq”, *al-Ahram*, Cairo, March 27, 2003.

answer is clear, the American objectives are the domination over the Gulf, its energetic resources, and support the supremacy of Israel.

Resistance and Disappointment:

The initial Iraqi resistance in Oum Qasr and al-Nassiriya, in southern Iraq caused some bewilderment and excitement in Arab press, similar to that of the Western one. Few expected that Iraqi resistance will concentrate in Shiite areas, as well as few expected that such little resistance will be met in and around Baghdad. The headlines, features, photos and maps of the initial days focus on the American war machine, and the military developments on the ground. Five days after the start of the military operation, al-Hayat headline reads “The losses change American plans and the fighting in the south overshadows the advance over Karbala”.¹⁰ “Iraq Resists”, appears in several headlines. Egyptian leader Mubarak is quoted saying that the war will last longer than we were told¹¹ ... and later warns the coalition that their action will create “a hundred Bin Laden”.¹²

Next comes the civilian victims, and the destruction caused by the bombardments. On April 2, *al-Quds al-Arabi* headline reads “The Marines kill women and children with the pretext of opposing the suicidals”, with the imposing image of a killed baby in an incident north of al-Najaf. Soon images of American tanks in Baghdad, and children in Basra begging for water follows. And then the disappointment to the fate of Baghdad: al-Hayat headline reads: “And on April 9 Baghdad fell...and Saddams statue”. On page 3a number of articles describe depression in Egypt, and surprise in Syria. In the center of the page a Syrian girl is crying on an Iraqi flag during a demonstration.¹³

Frustration and Uncertainty:

Even before the fall of Baghdad, deep frustration dominated the Arab media reports. Most Arab intellectuals are convinced that they will only losers from the current war. *Al-Hayat* publishes an analysis entitled: “Two lies... ‘invading liberator’ and ‘resisting dictator’” where it predicts the greatest loser to be Iraq, and to disintegrate into little conflicts.¹⁴ Even *al-Ahram* expresses the deep frustration of the average Egyptian, in very harsh words: “The Anglo-American aggression on Iraq did not leave a single Egyptian house, without a wave of fear, anxiety, and depression, and the feeling of uncertainty towards the future of the children who will grow in a common geographic entity- the Arab world...”¹⁵

War on Iraq, Israel, and the future of the Region:

This frustration has much to do with a long history. For most Arab thinkers and journalists, there is close link between the US war on Iraq, and Arab-Israeli conflict. And the links are many. US military officials invited Israeli military experts, and visited Israel to learn the experience of urban warfare Tsahal had in Lebanon and the occupied territories.¹⁶ Al-Hayat,

¹⁰ *Al-Hayat*, London, March 25, 2003.

¹¹ *Al-Hayat*, London, March 28, 2003.

¹² *Al-Nahar*, Beirut, April 1, 2003.

¹³ *Al-Hayat*, London, April 10, 2003.

¹⁴ Abd al-Hasan al-Amin, *al-Hayat*, March 30, 2003.

¹⁵ Mouhammad al-Barghouti, *al-Ahram*, Cairo, April 9, 2003.

¹⁶ “Americans Study the Israeli Experience in Lebanon and Palestine”, *Al-Nahar*, Beirut, April 2, 2003.

on its first page of April 2, has two news linking Israel and the changing regional balance of power. In one, it reports that Israeli made missiles are used by US forces against Iraq, and in the second reports about Israeli threats to Syria. The Syrian vice-president Zouhair Mashariqa is reported saying that the aim of the war is to change the conditions in the region.

Pride in the Arab media

“They [Europeans and Americans] kept on repeating about the necessity of having balanced, objective media, and we believed them”, said Doha Shams, the editor of the media section of al-Safeer.¹⁷ “But I am totally disappointed with the BBC coverage of the war,” and adds that Arab satellite televisions showed more professional courage than their Western colleagues. The success of al-Jazeera and other satellite networks has pushed a number of Arab states to invest 300 million dollars to compete with them, by creating the Saudi private network al-Arabiya. Yet, Shams underlines “their underlined pro-American position did not let them the space to win the Arab public opinion.” There is an enormous pride in the Arab world related to the success of the *new* Arab media. And even beyond: one report said that in the first days of the war, al-Jazeera increased its subscribers by 4 million in Europe alone.¹⁸

The significance of the changes taking place within the Arab media can be underlined by stressing that most of the Arab media is in fact national media and share only the classical Arab language (*al-foush'a*), while their coverage focuses on the interests of the countries where they are located. The vast majority of them is owned and controlled by the local governments, while the limits of freedom tolerated towards private media (where applicable), is a narrow one. The only exception to this rule is Lebanon, a country much weakened after a decade and a half of wars (1975-1990), and Syrian military presence, and the Arab media in exile, basically in London.

The contradictions between repressing one's own media from reporting the facts, and realizing the power of a courageous, professional mass media is best illustrated by the policy of the Ba'sist regime; on the one hand, Iraqi media was totally muzzled, while on the other Saddam's regime gave all the freedom to international but also Arab media like al-Jazeera to report the war from Baghdad, but also from inside cities from Basra to Mosul. For the observers of the Arab media, the big question now is: How will the sharp, critical, and operative Arab satellite channels coexist with censored official media?

Democracy will eventually be introduced to the Arab world. When it happens, it will come from up, above, from the air. Not from American sophisticated warplanes and missiles. No. Rather from a new generation of courageous Arab journalists broadcasting their news and views through satellite networks.

¹⁷ Telephone interview, April 4, 2003.

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, March 25, 2003, on the net: <http://media.guardian.co.uk/broadcast/story/0,7493,921693,00.html>