

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

The Al-Jazeera News Network: Opportunity or Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?

Updated July 23, 2003

Jeremy M. Sharp
Middle East Policy Analyst
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

The Al-Jazeera News Network: Opportunity or Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?

Summary

Al-Jazeera, the Arab world's first all-news network was started by the Persian Gulf monarchy of Qatar. It has come to be recognized as a key player in covering issues of central importance to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East: the conflict in Iraq, the war on terrorism, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Al-Jazeera has become so publicly influential that U.S. officials now regularly appear on the network. Although Al-Jazeera has received praise for its uncensored format and for airing interviews with U.S. and Israeli officials, as well as Arab critics of the policies of Arab governments, it has drawn criticism from many observers in the United States and elsewhere for a perceived lack of objectivity in covering these conflicts, including the activities of Al Qaeda. For their part, officials from Al-Jazeera have claimed that they merely reflect Arab popular resentment of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

This paper provides an overview of Al-Jazeera and explores the debate surrounding its objectivity. This report also analyzes Al-Jazeera's coverage of events in the Middle East, specifically, its coverage of events in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The final section of this report discusses policy options regarding U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East region. This paper will be updated periodically.

Contents

Al-Jazeera: An Overview	1
Origins	1
Programming	2
Objectivity	3
Al-Jazeera and Qatar	4
Issues of Concern for U.S. Foreign Policy	6
Iraq	6
Afghanistan & The War on Terrorism	8
Al-Jazeera and The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict	10
Al-Jazeera & The Arab Media	12
Policy Options for Congress	12

The Al-Jazeera News Network: Opportunity or Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?

Al-Jazeera: An Overview

Origins

Al-Jazeera (which means “the peninsula,” or “the island”) was founded in 1996 in Qatar after the new Emir of Qatar, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, purchased the rights to the Arabic TV division of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News Service. The BBC had been trying to develop an all-Arabic television station in conjunction with the Saudi-owned Orbit Radio and Television Service. The joint venture failed after the two parties could not agree on issues relating to the new station’s editorial independence.¹ The Qatari monarchy, which also has closely aligned itself with U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf region, was embarking upon a limited course of political liberalization and believed that modernizing Arab media was central to its reform effort. The Emir of Qatar provided Al-Jazeera with an initial grant of \$137 million,² allowing the station to retain many of the BBC’s recently hired Arab correspondents, many of whom are prominent Egyptian and Lebanese journalists with western training.

Prior to Al-Jazeera, Arab audiences could receive their news from either state-owned media or from several Arab satellite variety channels that broadcast both entertainment and news programming. The news on all of these channels was, and still is, to some degree censored and controlled by state authorities. Even transnational, subscription-based Arab satellite channels tend to reflect the viewpoints of the governments of the countries in which they are located.³ Therefore, many analysts considered Al-Jazeera to be a novelty in the Arab world, not only because it was the first 24 hour, all-news Arabic television station, but also because

¹ Iskandar, Adel & Mohammed El-Nawawy, *Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East*, Westview Press, 2002, p. 30.

² Despite its initial aim to be financially self-sufficient, Al-Jazeera is mostly dependent on Qatari state financing (roughly \$100 million annually). On the whole, the economics of Arab satellite TV in the Middle East makes it difficult for many stations to turn profits. Al-Jazeera’s controversial programming may deter some advertisers from buying air time on the station. Some observers have noted that the station only averages around 40-45 minutes of advertising per day. Louay Bahry, “The New Arab Media Phenomenon: Qatar’s Al-Jazeera,” *Middle East Policy*, June 2001.

³ Several Arab satellite TV stations are owned by Saudi Arabian businessmen with close ties to the Saudi royal family.

it allowed its commentators and guests more latitude in expressing their opinions (including criticisms of Arab governments) than had been previously regarded as the norm in the Arab media. In fact, the creators of Al-Jazeera modeled the station's format after western news services such as the Cable News Network (CNN) and the BBC, professing admiration for western stations' roundtable discussion programs, one-on-one interviews, and documentaries.

Although Al-Jazeera borrowed the format of CNN, its creators set out to differentiate Al-Jazeera from its western counterparts. Many of Al-Jazeera's correspondents were drawn to work for the station because they felt that American and British coverage of the 1991 Gulf War was not even-handed in that it paid insufficient attention to topics of interest to Arab audiences, such as the plight of Iraqi civilians during the conflict. Thus, Al-Jazeera believes that it provides an alternative perspective, particularly to the American and British news media. Al-Jazeera's motto, "The View and the Other Point of View," reflects its desire to be an uncensored, authentically Arab news source for Arabs.

Programming

Although Al-Jazeera, like most 24-hour news networks, intersperses news updates with headlines, sports, and financial news broadcasts throughout the day, its regularly scheduled programming is unconventional when compared to other Arab networks. Al-Jazeera has programs such as "The Opposite Direction," "Without Borders," "The Other Opinion," and "Open Dialogue," each of which features a well-known host who facilitates a lively discussion with some call-in questions and comments. Viewers of Al-Jazeera have noted that the station's staff often try to encourage confrontation by pitting guests with opposite viewpoints against one another in debate. This approach has proven to be informative and entertaining for many viewers; however, some Arab intellectuals have criticized the approach as being too sensationalistic and heated.

Beyond Al-Jazeera's programming, many western critics have accused the station of creating inflammatory lead-in segments to news reports, which often feature montages of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Afghanistan, or Iraq. These short snippets contain flashes of provocative pictures, usually of human suffering, accompanied by dramatic background music. Al-Jazeera called its coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom, "The War Against Iraq," and used lead-ins that showed civilian casualties in Iraqi hospitals, exploding bombs in Baghdad, and U.S. soldiers on patrol in civilian areas. Some suggest that Al-Jazeera is merely following a Middle Eastern tradition of dramatizing news events by appealing emotionally to the viewer. According to Al-Jazeera's Washington Bureau Chief, Hafez Al-Mirazi, "there is a feeling in our newsroom that you need to be as realistic as possible and carry the images of war and the effect that war has on people ... your population shouldn't just eat their dinner and watch sanitized images on TV and video games produced by the technological whizzes in the Pentagon and say this is war."⁴

⁴ "In the Line of Fire," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2003.

Objectivity

Since its inception, Al-Jazeera has received an enormous amount of publicity for breaking many of the taboos of self-censorship in the Arab media. *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman wrote that Al-Jazeera is “not only the biggest media phenomenon to hit the Arab world since the advent of television, it also is the biggest political phenomenon.”⁵ Indeed, many Middle Eastern experts have praised Al-Jazeera for creating a forum in which Arab opposition movements can freely criticize their host governments without fear of retribution. According to Edmund Ghareeb, an expert on Middle Eastern affairs, “it has raised the level of debate and opened the door for freer and more accurate news in the Arab world ... Al-Jazeera has helped satisfy a hunger in the Arab world. Its debates and discussion programs are tumultuous even by western standards.”⁶

However, for all of the praise Al-Jazeera has received, there has been an equal amount of criticism regarding the network’s perceived lack of objectivity. Many western media analysts have asserted that Al-Jazeera’s western-style format is merely a cover for a reporting style that is slanted toward a popular pan-Arab, pan-Islamist viewpoint. According to critic Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins University, “no matter how many Americans show up on Al-Jazeera, the station will pursue its own oppositional agenda. Al-Jazeera’s reporters see themselves as anti-imperialists. These men and women are convinced that the rulers of the Arab world have given in to American might; these are broadcasters who play to an Arab gallery whose political bitterness they share — and feed.”⁷ Moafac Harb, director of network news for the U.S. government’s Middle East Radio Network, known as Radio Sawa, has argued that Al-Jazeera feigns its objectivity by inviting U.S. and Israeli officials to present their views, while carrying provocative analysis in the studio, or one-sided news stories lacking neutrality prior to or following these same interviews.⁸ U.S. Ambassador Chris Ross, a fluent Arabic-speaker who has appeared on Al-Jazeera several times, commented that “it [Al-Jazeera] has a clear point of view on the events it is presenting for analysis and discussion ... with Al-Jazeera what you often get is several people, but all at one end of the spectrum. So there’s work to be done to induce more balance. But on the whole the advent of Al-Jazeera and other Arab satellite stations has been a great step forward in opening up the intellectual and cultural life of the Arab world.”⁹

In May 2003, Britain’s *Sunday Times* reported that Iraqi intelligence files uncovered after the Iraq war revealed that Iraqi intelligence had penetrated Al-Jazeera

⁵ Tom Friedman, “Glasnost in the Gulf,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2001.

⁶ Ghareeb, Edmund, “New Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assessment,” *The Middle East Journal*, Summer 2000.

⁷ Fouad Ajami, “What the Muslim World is Watching,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 18, 2001.

⁸ “Al-Jazeera Deflects Criticism of its Content, News Slant,” *Jerusalem Post*, April 1, 2003.

⁹ “An Interview with Ambassador Chris Ross,” *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal*, Fall-Winter 2002.

and had agents working there.¹⁰ Shortly after this revelation, Al-Jazeera replaced its Chief Executive Officer, Mohammed Jasim Al-Ali, who had been CEO of Al-Jazeera since its inception. According to press reports, the documents, which were obtained in Baghdad by the Iraqi National Congress, indicated that Al-Ali made clear to Iraqi agents that coverage would favor the Saddam Hussein regime. Al-Ali will continue to serve on Al-Jazeera's board of directors.

Defenders of Al-Jazeera have decried criticism of the station, noting that all newspapers and television stations have some degree of bias and that Al-Jazeera has at least given air time to dissenting opinions. According to the Beirut-based *Daily Star*, "in its coverage of the *Intifada* (Palestinian uprising), and the war in Afghanistan, Al-Jazeera has actually given a voice to every side in the conflict, and done nothing more than televise the images its reporters are seeing."¹¹ In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, the chair of the department of journalism and mass communication at the American University of Cairo remarked that "sure, the news we get in the Arab world is slanted ... in the same way the news received in the U.S. is biased."¹²

Al-Jazeera and Qatar

There has been considerable speculation as to why the station has been able to report the news freely, given the restrictive media environment in neighboring Arab states. Many commentators have attempted to answer this question by pointing to the nature of the Qatari state, as well as to the efforts of the Emir of Qatar to liberalize Qatari society, while using these political and social reforms to promote Qatar itself and increase its regional and global influence. Qatar is one of the most stable countries in the Middle East, with a per capita income of over \$25,000 for a population of 800,000 people, only 170,000 of whom have citizenship (the majority of the rest are foreign workers from South East Asia and the Phillippines). Analysts have pointed out that Al-Jazeera's openness and its "maverick" reporting style serves to promote Qatar as a progressive, modern state in the Middle East. Indeed, although the Qatari government has publicly sought to distance itself from Al-Jazeera, in terms of ownership, organization, and editorial output, both the state and the station enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship, in which the visibility of Al-Jazeera has led to an increase in the prominence of Qatar. Thus, Al-Jazeera, although functionally independent,¹³ could be said to indirectly serve the foreign policy goals of Qatar.

¹⁰ "Report Alleges that Iraqi Agents Infiltrated Al-Jazeera," *RFE/RL Iraq Report*, Vol. 6, No.22, May 16, 2003.

¹¹ "Qatar's Al-Jazeera is not pro-Zionist Enough - Fouad Ajami's Taste," *Daily Star*, November 20, 2001.

¹² "World and America Watching Different Wars; CNN vs. Al-Jazeera: Seeing is Often Believing," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 25, 2003.

¹³ Al-Jazeera is quasi-independent. Its managers have a great deal of freedom in the day-to-day operations of the station; however, Al-Jazeera relies on Qatari-state financing. Advertising revenue only covers 35-40% of Al-Jazeera's operating expenses. Meeting with Al-Jazeera producer, Mr. Khalid Al Mahmoud, January 11, 2003.

Some experts question whether, in the long term, Al-Jazeera can maintain independence if it is unable to wean itself off of Qatari state financing. Originally, Al-Jazeera executives believed that Al-Jazeera would be profitable by 2001. Two factors have prevented the station from generating more revenue: First, general market conditions in the Middle East advertising industry have not been favorable. There are already several Arab satellite television channels and as more stations come online and the situation in Iraq remains uncertain, advertising revenue will remain uneven. Second, there is a hesitation on the part of Arab conglomerates to advertise on Al-Jazeera, as they are fearful that Al-Jazeera's shaky relationships with Arab governments could harm their business interests. Because of these obstacles, the station is still running annual deficits, despite its rather lean workforce of 775 employees worldwide (CNN has 4,000 and BBC has 3,300). Several U.S. companies have run advertisements on Al-Jazeera, including General Motors, Gillette, and Procter and Gamble.¹⁴

Al-Jazeera's continued dependence on Qatar's financial backing has blurred the line between its status as a private or public news organization. Al-Jazeera has demonstrated characteristics of both a privatized and a state-run news network, as Qatar exerts little editorial control over day-to-day news reporting while subsidizing Al-Jazeera's annual budget. Although Al-Jazeera may subtly promote Qatar's political outlook, it does so under the umbrella of a regional news provider, making it appear less tied to any one Arab government. Nevertheless, Al-Jazeera's executives have promoted their channel's independent image, which raises the following questions: As Al-Jazeera remains in an ambiguous position regarding its private or public status, will some analysts start to overlook that status and treat Al-Jazeera as just another state-run media outlet, albeit one more sophisticated and popular than the rest? Or, will Al-Jazeera secure the necessary advertising revenue to cover costs, perhaps leading to a looser arrangement with the Qatari government?

Although Al-Jazeera has drawn praise for its willingness to discuss aspects of Arab politics previously considered off limits in Arab discourse,¹⁵ critics continue to point out that Al-Jazeera does not treat Qatar with the same degree of scrutiny as it does other Arab governments. Al-Jazeera executives have countered that Qatar is relatively free of political strife and therefore does not require much attention. However, according to the *Asian Times*, "it (Al-Jazeera) soft-peddles its domestic critique. Al-Jazeera has been dogged in its coverage of financial and political deals cut between Arab governments and Israel, but when allegations came out that Qatar had opened a trade office in Tel Aviv, the station did not go after the story."¹⁶ Other commentators have asked why the station has not fully explored Qatar's friendly relationship with the U.S. military. Although Al-Jazeera's website did cover a December 2002 U.S. war game in Qatar, dubbed "Operation Internal Look," there have been few attempts to examine the U.S. military presence in Qatar.

¹⁴ Wheeler, Brain, "Al-Jazeera's Cash Crisis," *BBC News Online*, April 7, 2003.

¹⁵ Al-Jazeera often has provided a forum for Islamist opposition parties to debate government policies - a practice not widely accepted in many Arab states.

¹⁶ Ian Urbina, "Al-Jazeera: Hits, Misses, and Ricochets," *Asian Times*, December 25, 2002.

Issues of Concern for U.S. Foreign Policy

Iraq

Al-Jazeera's coverage of Iraq has drawn both praise and criticism. Al-Jazeera's first foray into the Iraq-U.S. confrontation came in 1998, when Iraq and the United States were in a standoff over the removal of U.N. weapons inspectors from Iraq. Al-Jazeera outmaneuvered other networks, most notably CNN, by having correspondents in Iraq once the United States and Britain launched air and missile strikes as part of Operation Desert Fox. Al-Jazeera also obtained an exclusive interview with Saddam Hussein, who reportedly wanted to deal with a station that could reach a wide Arab audience. Some observers have contended that Al-Jazeera's popularity and credibility in the Middle East was established at that time. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera's detractors accused the network of portraying Iraq as a victim during the standoff, focusing more on the detrimental effects of economic sanctions than on Saddam Hussein's disregard of United Nations' resolutions.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of the 2003 war in Iraq has become a story within the wider story of the war. Following previous patterns, Al-Jazeera has been recognized for its access inside Iraq,¹⁷ while being criticized for being sensationalistic and slanted in its coverage of the U.S. military operation. Some observers have praised Al-Jazeera for keeping several reporters and camera crews on the ground in Baghdad, Mosul, and Basra and delivering live feeds of wartime footage, to which several U.S. news networks, including CNN, have access through partnership agreements.¹⁸ According to *BusinessWeek*, during the Iraq war, Al-Jazeera had more reporters in Iraq than any other major news station.¹⁹

Al-Jazeera also is one of the few stations that has aired press briefings from Iraqi officials, as well as video footage whose authenticity has been disputed of Saddam Hussein in meetings with other senior Iraqi leaders. Several U.S. officials and independent analysts have appeared on the station to give commentary on the U.S. war effort. Prior to the start of the war, the Pentagon granted Al-Jazeera four "embedded" slots with the U.S. military. However, most of Al-Jazeera's reporters on the ground have remained independent of the U.S. military. According to Georgetown University Professor Samer Shehata, "the war coverage on Al-Jazeera compares favorably with the war coverage on American networks ... they have a perspective. It's from a perspective of what the war is like for the Iraqi people ... but I've never seen anything favorable to the Iraqi regime on Al-Jazeera."²⁰

¹⁷ Unlike many television networks which had operated in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Al-Jazeera used mostly Iraqi nationals as reporters, enabling them to circumvent the regime's restrictive visa policies for foreign journalists. See, Ahmed, Assya Y. "Al-Jazeera Under Fire Once Again: This Time the GCC Threatens Sanctions," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal*, Fall-Winter 2002.

¹⁸ Al-Jazeera executives accused other stations of stealing their live feed during the war.

¹⁹ "Al-Jazeera: In an Intense Spotlight," *BusinessWeek Online*, March 26, 2003.

²⁰ "In the Line of Fire," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2003. op. cit.

Negative reaction to Al-Jazeera's coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom has come from many fronts. U.S. Administration officials, Members of Congress, and some independent analysts were angered that U.S. prisoners of war and several dead U.S. soldiers were displayed on Iraqi TV and on an Al-Jazeera broadcast in late March 2003. U.S. officials accused Al-Jazeera of providing a vehicle for Iraqi propaganda and for actions that violated international rules on handling of prisoners of war. In testimony before the House Armed Service Committee on April 4, 2003, W. Hays Parks, special assistant to the Judge Advocate General of the Army, stated that "Iraqi Television and al-Jazeera have aired a tape of U.S. soldiers answering questions in humiliating and insulting circumstances designed to make them objects of public curiosity, in violation of the GPW (1949 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Prisoners of War)."²¹

Others have pointed to the overall tone of Al-Jazeera's broadcasts, labeling them inflammatory, emotional, and slanted toward covering the suffering of the Iraqi people, rather than Iraqis celebrating the demise of the Hussein regime. In one broadcast from a Baghdad hospital where wounded children were shown, an Al-Jazeera correspondent commented with distress that "they said it would be a clean war, they said they wouldn't hit civilians, they said they wouldn't hit infrastructure, they said, and said, and said."²² In addition, Al-Jazeera has come under fire for its choice of terminology, which many commentators have suggested is heavily weighed against the United States. For example, coalition troops are sometimes called "invading forces" and suicide attacks are called "martyrdom operations," terms that Arab governments and the Arab media often use to describe the Israeli army and Palestinians.

In the United States, the New York Stock Exchange revoked the credentials of Al-Jazeera, saying its credentials were only for news that provided "responsible" coverage.²³ In addition, Akamai Technologies, an Internet Developer based in Cambridge, MA, cancelled a contract to provide web services for Al-Jazeera's new English language website. On the other hand, Iraqi officials demanded that several Al-Jazeera correspondents leave Iraq, accusing the station of being an extension of U.S. propaganda after Al-Jazeera broadcasted images of Iraqis trampling on pictures of Saddam Hussein. In response, Al-Jazeera suspended coverage by its correspondents in northern and southern Iraq.

Nevertheless, Al-Jazeera reportedly has substantially increased its subscriber base since the start of the war and has received much media attention. An Al-Jazeera correspondent, Tariq Ayoub, was killed in Iraq after U.S. missiles struck a hotel in downtown Baghdad. The hotel has been a base for foreign reporters. Al-Jazeera accused the United States of deliberately targeting its journalists, an accusation the

²¹ "Statement by W. Hays Parks," House Armed Service Committee Hearing on Iraq's Violations of the Law of Armed Conflict, April 4, 2003. Al-Jazeera officials defended their decision to air pictures of the dead soldiers by saying that they had to air the pictures so that Americans can make up their own minds about the Iraq war.

²² "Emotional TV Coverage Feeds Popular View of War," *Financial Times*, March 31, 2003.

²³ "Al-Jazeera Calls on US to Ensure Free Press," *Reuters*, March 28, 2003.

United States denied vehemently. During the war in Afghanistan in 2001, Al-Jazeera's Kabul office was accidentally struck by U.S. fire. Despite Ayoub's death, a recent article in *The New Yorker* noted a marked improvement in relations between Al-Jazeera and the U.S. military. According to Al-Jazeera producer and reporter Omar al-Issawi, "slowly, people at CENTCOM are starting to realize that we're not the enemy ... we're not some insensitive monster bent on bashing America."²⁴

In postwar Iraq, Al-Jazeera has continued to slant its coverage against the United States, labeling Iraqi attacks against U.S. forces as "resistance" to the "occupation."²⁵ Although many of Al-Jazeera's reports from Iraq are factual accounts of the latest events, reports are often followed by critical statements of local Iraqis without providing the perspective of coalition forces. Al-Jazeera's Iraq coverage is often introduced by a short series of images, depicting U.S. soldiers in a negative light.

Afghanistan & The War on Terrorism

Although Al-Jazeera's coverage of Operation Desert Fox brought the station much notoriety in 1998, it was its proximity to Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorist organization that brought the news network into the global mainstream. When the United States began Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, Al-Jazeera was the only major news network with a field office in Kabul. As was the case in Iraq, many observers were impressed with the station's ability to "get the scoop," as western networks were forced to rebroadcast Al-Jazeera transmissions with their now identifiable gold logo in the corner of the screen.

However, Al-Jazeera's considerable access to the Taliban and Al Qaeda also brought it a high degree of scrutiny from western governments, particularly after it aired taped speeches of Osama Bin Laden. Al-Jazeera had been airing taped interviews and footage of Osama Bin Laden since 1998, as part of its regular coverage of the region.²⁶ However, after the attacks of September 11, 2001 and Al-Jazeera's airing of a Bin Laden tape only hours after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, some western media outlets began to accuse Al-Jazeera of being a mouthpiece for Al Qaeda;²⁷ other observers even accused the station of collaborating with Al Qaeda.

Bush Administration officials were displeased with the station's decision to air the tapes, as Secretary of State Colin Powell criticized Al-Jazeera for carrying "fierce" and "irresponsible" statements from Osama Bin Laden and other Al Qaeda

²⁴ Hampton Sides, "Doha Postcard: A CENTCOM Star," *The New Yorker*, April 21 & 28, 2003.

²⁵ "Media Occasionally Distort View of U.S. Role in Iraq," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)*, Document ID: GMF20030714000135, July 14, 2003.

²⁶ Al-Jazeera had aired several tapes of Osama Bin Laden, including a wedding tape of one of his sons in Khandahar in 1999. See El-Nawawy & Iskandar, pp. 148-150.

²⁷ One popular London newspaper dubbed Al-Jazeera as "Bin Laden TV."

spokesmen.²⁸ Other officials, including National Security Director, Condoleezza Rice, held meetings with the major U.S. news networks to formulate a common policy toward future broadcasts of any new Bin Laden tape. Al-Jazeera staffers and others criticized the U.S. government for trying to censor free speech. U.S. officials responded by asserting that the broadcasting of Bin Laden's tapes could pose a threat to national security and suggesting that his speeches might contain hidden messages to followers around the world.

Since the initial controversy over the Bin Laden tapes, there have been a number of reports as to why Al Qaeda chose Al-Jazeera as a conduit for its messages. Many analysts believe that Al Qaeda was attracted to Al-Jazeera's large Arabic-speaking audience. Observers also speculated that Al-Jazeera, eager to make headlines and without rigorous governmental scrutiny, was in a position to broadcast the Bin Laden tapes, as opposed to the more cautious Arab state media. Some analysts considered that Al Qaeda would have found Al-Jazeera to be sympathetic to its cause based on the network's past coverage of Iraq in 1998. One theory explaining the Al-Jazeera - Bin Laden connection comes from Al-Jazeera's London Bureau Chief, Yosri Fouda, who interviewed two of Al Qaeda's top leaders, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi bin Al-Sheeba (both are now in U.S. custody). Fouda had been chosen by Al Qaeda's leaders to tell their story. According to Fouda:

I asked them [Al Qaeda], first of all, why me? And they said that there are other journalists both inside and outside of Al-Jazeera who are thought of as having some sort of degree of sympathy with their cause. So for that very reason, they said they wanted to have this story done by someone "more secular in his professional approach" so that their message would carry more credibility ... it confirmed my initial impression that there is someone who understands media, and particularly television, inside Al Qaeda."²⁹

Al Qaeda may have been looking for an outlet like Al-Jazeera, knowing that the station was eager to break a big story and would be willing to present their point of view without editorializing its content. In a *New York Times Magazine* feature on Fouda, author Peter Maass noted that "Fouda is a chameleon ... he mixes easily at both mosques and pubs. He is, in this way, an excellent journalist, because he can pretend to be all things to all people, including a friend to terrorists."³⁰

Some commentators have pointed out that Al-Jazeera's coverage of U.S. operations in Afghanistan in 2001 was similar in focus to its coverage of Iraq a year and a half later. Again, critics have noted that the station aired Taliban claims of military successes on the battlefield with little or no response from U.S. officials. Al-Jazeera also was criticized as placing virtually exclusive emphasis on the plight of

²⁸ "Al-Jazeera not to Change Coverage of Afghan Events; Rejects U.S. Criticism," *Al-Watan* (BBC Monitoring Middle East), October 12, 2001.

²⁹ Schleifer, Abdullah. "Covering Al Qaeda, Covering Saddam: A Dialogue Between Al-Jazeera London Bureau Chief Yosri Fouda and Abdullah Schleifer," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal*, Fall-Winter 2002.

³⁰ Maass, Peter. "When Al Qaeda Calls: An Arab Journalist's Close Encounter with Terrorists," *New York Times Magazine*, February 3, 2003.

Afghan civilians and the destruction caused by American bombing, airing gruesome images of wounded Afghan women and children. Whereas in U.S. government parlance, the war in Afghanistan was part of a larger “war on terrorism,” Al-Jazeera’s method for describing the war came with the preface of “the war on what it calls terror.”³¹ Analysts further criticized Al-Jazeera’s alleged overemphasis on covering civil liberties violations of American Muslims, asserting that such violations were the acts of individuals and contrary to U.S. policy.

Al-Jazeera and The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

As one of the most politically divisive conflicts in the world, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a source of contention for the world’s media, challenging the objectivity of western and non-western media outlets alike. Within this context, many observers believe that Al-Jazeera is no different. Like other Arab networks and newspapers, it has covered the conflict from a distinctly Arab perspective. According to one Al-Jazeera correspondent based in the West Bank, “to be objective in this area is not easy because we live here. We are part of the people of here. And this situation belongs to us also, and we have our opinions.”³²

In contrast to state-controlled Arab media, Al-Jazeera has taken the controversial step of broadcasting interviews with and statements by Israeli officials, a practice shunned by many Arab channels. Al-Jazeera has invited Israeli leaders such as Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak on air for TV interviews. Israel also has sent officials, some of whom are fluent in Arabic, from its Foreign Ministry to appear on Al-Jazeera. Indeed, some Arab governments, newspapers, and even Palestinian hardliners have accused Al-Jazeera of being in league with Israel and acting as an extension of Israeli intelligence. Al-Jazeera has noted that Arab governments tend to vocalize accusations of Al-Jazeera’s collaboration with Israel during times of tension between the station and foreign Arab governments.³³

Despite the novelty of Israeli officials on Arab television, some analysts have pointed out that, in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Al-Jazeera follows a similar approach to its coverage of the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism in Afghanistan: it uses vivid, violent montages of Palestinian suffering to introduce news segments; it employs language which describes suicide bombings as “martyrdom operations;” and it calls the Israeli army an “occupation force.” This approach has caused some experts to suggest that Al-Jazeera’s personalization of the news, in which it emphasizes Arab and Muslim victimization, is a template which has been applied in its coverage of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Israeli-Palestinian

³¹ See Ajami, “What the Muslim World is Watching.”

³² “Inside Al-Jazeera,” *CBS 60 Minutes*, October 10, 2001.

³³ Al-Jazeera has drawn the ire of many Arab governments over the last several years, specifically for critical coverage of Arab leaders. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Bahrain (among others) have used several retaliatory techniques against Al-Jazeera and Qatar itself including: banning Al-Jazeera in their respective countries, expelling its journalists, pressuring advertisers, and even temporarily withdrawing Ambassadors if the slight was considered serious enough. Al-Jazeera executives have boasted of having as many official detractors in the Arab world as in the United States.

conflict. Mamoun Fandy, a Middle East expert and media analyst, asserted that in one Al-Jazeera anchor's description of the U.S. capture of the Baghdad airport during the recent Iraq war, the anchor mistakenly replaced the United States with the word Israel. According to Fandy, "you take the Americans, put the Israelis; you take the Palestinians, put the Iraqis; and the same script goes on."³⁴

Al-Jazeera's detractors also have accused it of propagating anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli viewpoints, in an attempt to sensationalize its programming and boost its ratings. In the fall of 2002, David Duke, a former leader of the Klu Klux Klan, appeared on the Al-Jazeera talk show "Without Borders," claiming that Israeli intelligence knew in advance that the World Trade Center was about to be destroyed and that it had warned Israelis to evacuate the towers before they were hit.³⁵ Duke made the same argument in a Palestinian paper in January 2002. Al-Jazeera also has been attacked for broadcasting a talk show with the title "Is Zionism Worse Than Nazism?," in addition to hosting a call-in show which discussed the validity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Both shows did present different viewpoints unlike other Arab media outlets; however, some observers claim that the anti-Semitic viewpoint was given an unfair amount of attention.

Supporters of Al-Jazeera believe that the station's coverage is not biased, but merely reflects a different perspective of the conflict, in which Palestinians are locked into a war of independence with the Israeli military. According to Al-Jazeera's Washington Bureau Chief, Hafez Al-Mirazi, "The first Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising) was covered by CNN, which directed its coverage to a Western public, and ended up de-humanizing the Palestinian struggle and cause. But because of our coverage, and that of other Arab satellite television channels, the second *Intifada* influenced Arab public opinion more."³⁶ Al-Jazeera also has drawn praise for its strong presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as the station has been able to broadcast real-time coverage of Israeli-Palestinian violence. Although the images of Al-Jazeera broadcasts are often disturbing and beyond the norms found on U.S. television, proponents of Al-Jazeera claim that they present a more realistic picture of the day-to-day hardships of life in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during the present conflict. Other commentators have noted that even the Palestinian Authority, like other Arab governments, has temporarily shutdown Al-Jazeera's Ramallah office when it disapproved of its broadcasts.³⁷

³⁴ "A Different Language, an online NewsHour Transcript with Jim Lehrer," *PBS Online NewsHour*, April 6, 2003.

³⁵ "Winners in the War - Before the Invasion of Iraq Few Outside the Middle East had heard of Al-Jazeera," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2003.

³⁶ "We Cover the News from an Arab Perspective," *Middle East Insight*, March 11, 2002.

³⁷ In 2001, the Palestinian Authority closed Al-Jazeera's Ramallah office for 3 days, reportedly after Chairman Yasir Arafat felt that an Al-Jazeera documentary had been to critical of his leadership.

Al-Jazeera & The Arab Media

Although Al-Jazeera has received much attention for its coverage of the war in Iraq, some observers suggest that, despite its popularity, it should not be treated as a barometer for measuring the Arab media as a whole. Currently, there are other television stations, like the new 24-hour news network Al-Arabiya, and many pan-Arab newspapers, some of which are published in western capitals, which reach a wide audience on a daily basis. According to media analyst David Hoffman, “most Americans have heard of only Al-Jazeera,”³⁸ but in reality, Arabs get their news from a variety of sources, many of which are “far worse” than Al-Jazeera. Indeed, in November 2002, an Egyptian television station, which is partially government-owned, broadcast a series entitled “Horseman Without a Horse.” The story was a chronicle of the Arab struggle against colonial rule and against the establishment of the state of Israel; however, it included a sub-plot involving a forged document - the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* - describing an alleged Jewish plot for world domination, which was used by the Nazis as a pretext for the Holocaust.³⁹

Al-Jazeera’s impact on the Middle Eastern media as a whole remains unclear. Some variety satellite networks have slightly altered their formats to include more debate-style talk shows. As previously mentioned, a new competitor news network, Al-Arabiya, has started operating in Dubai’s media city in the United Arab Emirates. Al-Arabiya reportedly has received a great deal of financial backing from more conservative sources, which may be reflected in its reporting style. Arab Media watchers have observed that, as popular as Al-Jazeera has become, many viewers still desire local news coverage, making Al-Jazeera only one of several news sources for the average viewer in the Middle East.⁴⁰ Some suggest that Al-Jazeera, because of its high subscription cost, is equally as popular outside of the Middle East as within. In the United States, subscribers can order Al-Jazeera through satellite dish companies, which package Al-Jazeera with several other channels at a price of several hundred dollars a year.

Policy Options for Congress

Al-Jazeera’s ability to cover breaking news, to promote its slick, entertaining format, and to project subtly its pan-Arab, pan-Islamist approach to covering the news has sparked some U.S. officials and analysts to suggest ways of promoting a response to its distinctive influence. Others have dismissed calls for policy responses. Some experts warn that any overt U.S. action could be viewed as heavy handed in a region which has traditionally been sensitive to outside involvement in regional or local affairs. Al-Jazeera claims that U.S. steps intended to promote a more balanced media in the Arab world will backfire, because Arabs will consider it a propaganda effort of the U.S. government. A range of possible actions has been proposed. In one category are actions that actively promote U.S. policy. They include:

³⁸ Hoffman, David. “Beyond Public Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2002.

³⁹ “Egypt Airs Anti-Semitic Series,” *BBC News Online*, November 7, 2002.

⁴⁰ Hoffman, op.cit.

- *Create an alternative Arabic Language Television Network.* In the emergency supplemental appropriations bill of April 16, 2003 (P.L. 108-11), Congress designated \$30.5 million for the Middle East Television Network (METN).⁴¹ According to Norman Pattiz, the founder and chairman of Westwood One Radio Network and a member of the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), “as most people in the region get their news and information from TV, we need to be on TV so we can explain America and its policies, its people, and its culture from our own lips rather than have it described by the indigenous media.”⁴² The exact scope and style of METN has yet to be determined. The BBG already sponsors Radio Sawa, an Arabic radio station, which combines popular music with news headlines.
- *Tie foreign aid to media reform.* Some analysts contend that this technique, which has worked for some human rights cases, might be applied to the media as well.
- *Buy commercial air time on Arab networks.* During the last two years, the State Department Office of Public Diplomacy has been implementing the “Shared Values Program,” a \$15 million effort to promote positive images of Muslim life in America. TV advertisements depicting American Muslims ran for 5 weeks in late 2003 in Pakistan, Kuwait, Malaysia, and on some pan-Arab channels, but not Al-Jazeera.⁴³ Although the overall campaign continues, the State Department stopped running the commercials after the governments of Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon refused to carry them on state-run television.

Other policy experts have suggested more indirect ways of influencing the Arab media, including the following actions:

- *Have U.S. officials engage the Arab media more actively.* As previously mentioned, top United States cabinet officials have appeared on Al-Jazeera television for interviews. Proponents of this strategy believe that more appearances by U.S. officials, particularly those fluent in Arabic, would convey confidence in U.S. foreign policy. Skeptics of this strategy believe that Al-Jazeera and other channels could skew the pre and post-interview analysis against the U.S. position.
- *Favor the more moderate Arab satellite networks.* With almost a dozen different Arab satellite channels, some analysts believe that

⁴¹ For more information on METN, please see CRS Report RS21565, *The Middle East Television Network: An Overview*.

⁴² “U.S. to Launch Arabic TV Channel,” *BBC News Online*, April 7, 2003.

⁴³ “U.S. Propaganda Pitch Halted,” *CBSNews.com*, January 16, 2003.

U.S. interests would be better served if U.S. officials appeared on less sensationalist Arab networks in order to foster competitors to Al-Jazeera. Some even suggest encouraging U.S. companies to advertise on these types of stations.

- *Encourage more privatization of media.* Under the auspices of the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), there have been plans to fund media reform programs in some Arab states. As MEPI is just starting to take shape, the initiative could fund media training for aspiring journalists, as well as programs that promote freedom of the press.⁴⁴

One argument, which is widely circulated in Arab intellectual circles, is that the best way to combat the coverage of channels such as Al-Jazeera would be to focus U.S. foreign policy on solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Others argue that biased coverage will continue no matter what direction the United States takes its policy in the Middle East. With the United States heavily engaged in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, Al-Jazeera will continue to play a role in reporting and interpreting U.S. foreign policy to the Arab world.

⁴⁴ For more information on MEPI, please see CRS Report RS21457, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*.