

REPORT



Al Jazeera: 25 Years of Living Dangerously

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centre**

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Introduction

On 1 November 2021, Al Jazeera celebrated its 25-year-anniversary. Since inception, it has been beset with an astonishing number of threats and attacks that were supposed to intimidate the network and prevent reportage in one of the world's most conflict-stricken regions. Al Jazeera has been a trailblazer in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, putting forward stories and perspectives that would have otherwise never been covered by local or regional media. The network has tapped into a 350 million plus audience of primarily Arab-speaking viewers in more than twenty-two countries. The network's championing of democracy and human rights amidst popular uprisings has attracted the ire of dictators in the region. Here it is important

to acknowledge the international context. Since the collapse of the first, second, and third worlds and the globalisation of media communication, framings of geopolitical reality have become essentially contested. Such was evident in Al Jazeera's daring coverage of the 2000 Intifada, the 2001 War on Afghanistan, and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In the latter context, the human cost of the war and the despoliation of Arab/Muslim sovereignty and heritage was emphasised. Significant airtime given to anti-war reactions and oppositional world-views exemplified the de-Westernisation of global media communication. In this commentary, all these aspects will be examined as will the corporate, socio-political, and geopolitical complexities surrounding the rise of this resilient news media organisation.



Demonstrators, including members of the press from the Government Information Office, gather in front of the Al Jazeera building in Gaza City on August 08, 2017, to denounce the order to shut down Al Jazeera television's operations issued by the Israeli government over accusations that the channel had promoted violence in response to provocations at the al-Aqsa mosque compound. (Ali Jadallah - Anadolu Agency)

Al Jazeera Emerges

Global television ecology

Since World War I, international broadcasting has been at the centre of news production. This form of broadcasting was almost exclusively a state business, as governments used it as a tool of strategic communication and public diplomacy. World War II and the Cold War witnessed heated contests between state and public broadcasters of the different protagonists (e.g., BBC, Radio Free Europe, Radio Moscow). However, the post-Cold War period saw a decline in these government-funded media, while privately-owned global satellite news networks (e.g., CNN, Sky News, and MSNBC) came to prominence in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Western dominance over information flows had been observed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) since the late 1970s. Many UNESCO members called for reform of the global media order at that juncture. The MacBride Commission, a UNESCO panel, issued a report titled "Many Voices, One World" (1980), questioning the equitability of the world information order. Global news agencies were criticised for favouring news from the West while ignoring other geographical areas. The report also observed that four major news agencies controlled over 80 per cent of global news flows, and a small number of developed countries dominated almost 90 per cent of radio broadcasting (Masmoudi, 1979).

However, such criticism fell on deaf ears, and the fall of the Soviet Union only exacerbated the situation. Western corporations took advantage of the new world order while enjoying technological breakthroughs in information and communication technology that allowed the real-time delivery of information. The prevalence of mega-corporations over the media field, including television, radio, film, music, and digital media, reached extremely high levels from the mid-1990s onwards. Ninety per cent of global media (TV, radio, news, digital) became dominated by six super-powerful corporations: Viacom-CBS, Comcast, Newscorp, Disney, Time-Warner, and Sony (Sanders, 2017). In 2006, a study produced by Leeds University Professor Christopher Paterson analysed foreign news coverage in online news sources. The study suggested that somewhere between 50 and 85 per cent of online news comes from verbatim news agency use -- Reuters, AP, AFP (Paterson, 2007: 62). Similarly, Professor Daya Thussu asserted in 2006 that Reuters and the television arm of AP, largely controlled the global flow of audio-visual news material (Thussu, 2006: 152). Thussu observed that the three agencies (Reuters, AP,

and AFP) "may often reflect Western, or more specifically, US editorial policies" (Thussu, 2006: 153).

Against this background, there has been much debate about the influence of global television networks over national foreign policies and the outcomes of world events (Gilboa, 2005). One often cited trend is the "CNN effect," a term coined during the US intervention in Somalia (1992-1993). This illustrates the purported power that global media corporations have in shaping public opinion agendas and influencing decision-making during international crises. Meanwhile, global news outlets altered the journalism business significantly. They created "a system of news-gathering, editing and distribution not based on national or regional boundaries" (Reese, 2006: 242).

More importantly, news journalism morphed into a corporate, business-oriented model. Business-friendly news products pervaded the media, inundating audiences with "advertising, infomercials, and other corporately sponsored current affairs programmes" (Hope, 2006: 279-280). Little space was left for in-depth analyses or exhaustive investigations. Worse, low-cost news production became the motto of the day, i.e., global television networks offered only tiny budgets for international newsgathering, denting the latter's quality significantly.

The one-sidedness and lack of political nuance in covering international events, Western-centric editorial policies, and the primacy of corporate definitions concerning truth and accuracy affected the credibility of global news media in the international arena. In turn, this state of affairs encouraged governments and other entities from diverse locations to become part of the "contra-flow" phenomenon. The latter encapsulates non-Western attempts to reverse dominant Western information flows (Thussu, 2007: 50). Hence, from the mid-1990s onwards, new players joined the exclusive club of predominantly Western broadcasters. Networks from countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Russia, China, Venezuela, India, Iran, and others started broadcasting via satellite, aiming to reach transnational and global audiences.

Al Jazeera was conceived during the First Gulf War (1991). At that time, the American-led war on Iraq had the effect of an earthquake, politically and media-wise. Arab societies were left without agency or voice, as the war was chronicled through Western lenses. During that war, CNN outmanoeuvred all competition to become the primary and instant chronicler of the conflict. Time magazine praised



Smoke rises after an Israeli strike on a building in Gaza City that housed the offices of Al Jazeera and the Associated Press on May 15, 2021.
(Ali Jadallah - Anadolu Agency)

CNN for providing “an exceptional and perhaps unprecedented, live account of the start of war from inside an enemy capital” (Zelizer, 2002: 71). Many governments around the world, ranging from China to Venezuela, surely noted this widening gap in media capabilities and the ensuing loss of political and diplomatic influence.

The Arab regimes which supported the 1991 US-led war on Iraq felt vulnerable as their media machines had neither the credibility nor the capabilities for selling their alliance with Washington to domestic populations. Arab state-owned television outlets, in a state of advanced decay, simply relayed the ineffectual routines of local dictators. For instance, Saudi television failed to mention Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait more than 48 hours after it occurred. The inefficiency of government-controlled media, prompting the Saudi regime to go on a shopping spree and acquire satellite broadcasting media internationally.

Consequently, Saudi-sponsored Satellite broadcasters mushroomed after the 1991 war. Stations, such as MBC (1991) and ART (1994), started their operations, reaching

Arab viewers throughout the MENA region. These outlets proposed entertainment with light news. However, the Saudis wanted more and tried to venture into 24/7 news broadcasting. They commissioned the BBC to establish a channel called ORBIT. However, at about the same time, the BBC aired some critical programmes about the Saudi Royal family, prompting the regime to retaliate against the BBC and stop the ORBIT project in April 1996. Qatar’s emir got wind of the sudden annulment of this endeavour and contacted journalists involved in this project. He then established a three-member committee to follow up and establish the new satellite channel. Initially, a mix of entertainment and news was considered, but afterwards, the decision was made to establish a professional 24/7 news TV station, and Al Jazeera was born. At first, the latter was only targeting transnational audiences in the Middle East and went to air for merely six hours a day (it began operating 24 hours a day in January 1999). Its programmes were aired initially in Arabic, reaching Arab countries as well as the Arab diaspora in the West. In 2006, Al Jazeera English was inaugurated, and the quest for a more global reach began.

Geopolitical background

From the onset, Al Jazeera was born out of complex geopolitical dynamics. The 1991 Gulf War had major ramifications for the region. By invading Kuwait, Saddam Hussain proved to the region that Saudi protection was inadequate. The political and economic costs of American protection affected all Gulf countries. Therefore, an influential fraction within the Qatari elite wanted an independent course of action outside of Saudi suzerainty. This path was set by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who took the reins of power in 1995 and immediately pursued a more independent foreign policy. He also wanted to modernise his nation by capitalising on vast domestic energy resources. There are allegations that the Saudis tried to oust him via two attempted coups. Moreover, Riyadh engaged in a complex stratagem to put pressure on Qatar via a series of land grabs, border incidents, and attempts to prevent Qatar from exporting its energy resources. The latter ploy was possible, as Qatar's only land passage passes through Saudi Arabia (all Qatar's energy exports via land pipelines must go through Saudi territory). Faced with such an impediment, Qatar circumvented Saudi territory by exporting liquefied natural gas (LNG) through maritime routes, becoming at one stage the world's largest LNG exporter, and fully exploiting the basin it shares with Iran—Saudi Arabia's arch-rival.

The large revenues enabled Qatar to realise its modernisation plans and create a comparative advantage vis-à-vis its neighbours. This strategy required soft power and public diplomacy to build a new image. Qatar moved away from being a little-known Gulf oil producer to that of an indispensable player in global politics. Enjoying extreme affluence in a dangerous neighbourhood can be risky. The more so when regional hegemony, such as Iran, and Saudi Arabia try to impose their diktat in the region. Deployment of all available diplomatic tools plus soft power enabled Qatari leaders to engage with a multitude of international political players and widen their international networks.

Qatar's strategy is wide and encompassing. It aspires to transform Qatar into a series of financial, transport, education, cultural, sport, and media hubs that would connect the region to the world and attract visitors and talents. Such a plan, designed to energise the local economy beyond hydrocarbon revenues, would advance the nation's branding and encourage tourism and the creative industries. The media component of this strategy is deeply intertwined with Qatar's political role, especially when it comes to mediation and peace facilitation [1].

Judicious choices

During the inception of Al Jazeera, the Qatari authorities hired the best Arab journalists, who were trained by the BBC to the highest standards of news journalism and did not intrude on the new network's editorial policy.

At the forefront of this policy is Faisal al-Kasim, a Syrian Druze with a PhD in English literature. Previously, he was with the BBC (Arabic Service) as a news producer and anchor. Al-Kasim became famous as the presenter for Al Ittijah Al Mo'akis (The Opposite Direction), a weekly talk show that boosted Al Jazeera's ratings in the first decade. The programme tackled some of the deepest political, social, and cultural issues in Arab society. It regularly hosted opponents of Arab regimes, triggering a storm of official measures against Al Jazeera from different governments unaccustomed to being criticised on air. For example, in November 1998, the Jordanian authorities closed the Al Jazeera's bureau in Amman (Sakr, 2001: 120). On 27 January 1999, the programme featured a heated debate about the Algerian civil war (Dec 1991- Feb 2002), in which a member of the opposition exposed the bloody human rights record of the military regime. As a result, the Algerian authorities shut down the electricity source to the capital Algiers (and some other cities) to stop the programme from being watched by the population (Zednik, 2002). Faisal Al- Kasim acknowledges the large latitude he had. He wrote:

Al- Jazeera's editorial policy is so lax that I am hardly ever given orders regarding programme content. The station has an even wider scope of freedom than the BBC Arabic radio, where I worked for ten years. I tackle issues that I never even dreamed of covering during my service at the BBC (Al-Kasim, 1999).

In the first decade of its existence, Al Jazeera placed a high threshold for the freedom of expression, offering a platform for opposition personalities and controversial figures while also exposing the human rights abuses and corruption within various regimes. Incidentally, while investing in media soft power, Qatar paid a hefty price, as its relations with other governments suffered. Arab regimes recalled their ambassadors from Doha on various occasions, whereas Al Jazeera personnel became persona non grata in numerous situations with offices in the Arab region routinely closed. However, these pressures were rebuffed each time. Qatari officials repeatedly said they would not interfere with Al Jazeera's editorial independence (Lage, 2005).

Al Jazeera's problems were also compounded by its daring international coverage. On 28 September 2000, the provocative visit of the-then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to

the Al-Haram Mosque in Jerusalem triggered the second Palestinian Intifada (Al Aqsa intifada). Al Jazeera made sure to report on the ensuing death and mayhem among Palestinian protesters, airing graphic footage and discussing abuses of power, unlike other Western television networks. This approach reinforced the credibility of Al Jazeera in the Arab World, earning the Doha-based network some of its highest viewership ratings ever, although it infuriated Shimon Peres, the Israeli foreign minister (Miles, 2005: 95-96).

Al Jazeera also burnished its credentials while covering the 2001 US war on Afghanistan. It was present in Taliban-controlled areas and provided live coverage of the US war operations, highlighting the resulting civilian casualties (Hickey, 2002). Al Jazeera also aired videotapes of Osama bin Laden, prompting major international new outlets to purchase its footage. The Qatar-based network also provided very critical coverage of the War on Iraq in 2003. British media reports suggested that President George W. Bush discussed with British Prime Minister Tony Blair the possibility of bombing Al Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar in April of 2004 (Sullivan and Pincus, 2005).

Al Jazeera's impactful coverage increased competition for the audiences in the region. While Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya, UAE-owned Sky News Arabia, and other Arab-owned media mushroomed, various western governments also launched their own Arabic services, trying to beat Al Jazeera in its own game. Examples include Al-Hurra (funded by the US government), BBC Arabic, France 24, Russia Today, and Deutsche Welle.

Organisational framework

In the inception phase, the Qatari authorities decided to establish Al Jazeera neither as a public broadcaster nor as a purely private entity. The former option would closely tie the network to governmental decision-making, while the latter would put in question any form of sustained financial support by the government. Therefore, under Qatari law (Law No. 21 of 2006), Al Jazeera was founded as a "private corporation for public benefit". Such a formula offered the best of both worlds. The network would have ample autonomy while also receiving generous financial backing from the State of Qatar.

Qatar is the originator of this hybrid model in international broadcasting (Samuel-Azran, 2013: 1293). Accordingly, the news channel retains its independence over day-to-day reporting, but the state still retains subtle control over thin red lines concerning editorial policy and high-level public diplomacy endeavours. This framework allowed Al Jazeera to grow unhindered. In November 1996, the network received a one-time donation of US\$137 million from

the State of Qatar preceding its launch (Bahry, 2001: 94). Further, annual operating funds of no less than US\$40 million annually was provided for the first years of operation (Bahry, 2001: 95). These amounts were considered a loan that Al Jazeera would need to pay back after 10 years of operation (Sakr, 2001: 56-57). The 10-year target was adopted on the premise that the channel would reach commercial self-sustainability over time, through advertisements, sponsorship agreements, and the sale of footage.

However, this target was never met. Despite high numbers of viewers, Al Jazeera did not reap the financial dividends of its popularity. In fact, Al Jazeera is under a de-facto boycott by major corporations because Saudi Arabia controls the largest media, public relations, and advertising portfolio in the Middle East. Tensions between Al Jazeera and Saudi Arabia prevented the network from tapping into the lucrative Saudi (and pan-Arab) advertising market, as Saudi authorities encouraged advertisers to boycott the Qatar-based outlet (Cherkaoui, 2017b: 108). Al Jazeera's problems with potential advertisers only compounded after the network's daring coverage of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which triggered acerbic comments from the highest echelons of the Bush administration. This flak discouraged multinational corporations from buying advertising space at the channel.

Meanwhile, Al Jazeera's prime footage from its exclusive interviews and coverage of conflict zones (Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza) attracted increasing demand from Western news organisations, such as CNN and the BBC. The British public broadcaster recognised the superior positioning of Al Jazeera in the region and signed a deal to exchange stories, share facilities, and uplink with the Qatar-based channel. Even so, the network finds it difficult to break even financially without ample flows of advertisements and thus has failed to secure sufficient funding from sources other than the Qatari government.

Regarding the organisational culture, because Al Jazeera Arabic was born in an unchartered news media eco-system, management practices and procedures were built from scratch. This peculiar situation paved the way to a culture of flexibility, out-of-the-box thinking, and reliance on employee resourcefulness (Zayani and Sahraoui, 2007: 43), tempered with some rigorous quality control adopted from the BBC. This mix produced some impressive journalistic programmes and coverage. Al Jazeera, in turn, supported its employees, providing them with job security and financial incentives commensurate with their commitment. At the same time, the management required a high threshold in terms of performance, creating a very demanding work environment.

In terms of recruitment, Al Jazeera Arabic recruited anchors, correspondents, and staff from every Arab country. The recruits were the best and the brightest talented journalists with in-depth local knowledge. This move not only reinforced the professionalism of the channel but also enhanced the pan-Arab credentials of Al Jazeera Arabic by providing a platform for a cross-fertilisation of views while focusing on key Arab concerns. Furthermore, the network provided prominent space to Arab women anchors and reporters, giving them visibility within the Arab public sphere. Their professionalism was openly recognised throughout the Arab world, affecting the place of Arab women in society positively.

Expansion mode

After the resounding success of its Arabic channel, Al Jazeera decided to expand its reach. The decision to broadcast in English was taken after the US-led invasion of Iraq (2003), in which Western corporate news media failed to provide adequate reporting concerning the rationale for the war and actions on the ground. In this context, it was abundantly clear that there was a big vacuum to fill.

The multi-layered expansion strategy included the launch of new channels and franchises to widen the network's footprint beyond the MENA region and Arabic-speaking diasporas. It also involved content-sharing agreements with other broadcasters. Further, the strategy entailed the extension of Al Jazeera's broadcasting footprint via satellite, cable, and terrestrial broadcast in numerous geographic zones as well as significant development of the network's online and digital operations.

Before launching its English arm officially, Al Jazeera tested the waters by launching its English website in March 2003. Unfortunately, however, the timing coincided with Al Jazeera's decision to air videos of dead and captured American servicemen in Iraq. Within the first 24 hours of the website launch, hackers took down the system (as well as the Arabic website). Additional complications delayed the re-launch of the English website by a few months.

After many back-and-forth, turbulent manoeuvres with internal and external actors, including heavy pressure applied by the US administration [2], Al Jazeera English (AJE) was launched in 2006. AJE's editorial strategy was designed to be different. This was not going to be a copy of its Arabic sister channel. It has its own managing director, director of news, editorial line and is in a separate building. More importantly, AJE's target audience is not defined by nationalism or political borderlines. It aims to be a genu-

ine voice for the global South, avoiding Western-centric political and cultural representations that prevailed within corporate media's newsrooms.

According to its first managing director, Nigel Parsons, who was interviewed prior to the channel's launch, AJE's decentralised newsgathering would provide a localised point-of-view and a bottom-up approach:

We kind of reinvented the news gathering process. It is to allow people to see events from the eyes of the people of that region, rather than through foreign eyes, which has tended to be the case in the past. And that is a benefit to both, the viewer inside of the region and the viewer outside of the region. People are tired of seeing themselves through foreign eyes. We want Africans to tell us about Africa. We want Arabs to tell us about the Middle East and Asians to tell us about Asia (Powers, 2009: 161).

AJE's management was in a race against the clock, trying to find the right balance between Al Jazeera Arabic's legacy of fearless yet controversial coverage and Western digestibility; between independent journalism and the funder's foreign policy; between the global south angle and traditional journalism; between international newsworthy events and local journalistic expertise. Global corporate news media is often criticised for "parachute journalism" whereby western journalists are sent to a conflict area with little contextual knowledge and no local language ability. Ultimately, AJE proved adept at juggling all these elements with a single objective in mind: consistently delivering compelling, contextual, and truthful reporting.

In the first few years, AJE established nearly 65 bureaus [3] with broadcasting initially emanating from four hubs—Doha, Kuala Lumpur, London and Washington, DC (Kuala Lumpur was later dropped). These hubs supervise the international bureaus. This approach was designed to decentralise newsgathering and strike a balance between the global and the local. Despite a pledge to adopt a nimble, agile organisation of 300-400 staff members, the number of AJE staffers tripled by 2012. Meanwhile, AJE's visibility increased. "When Al Jazeera English (AJE) was launched in 2006, it was available in more than 80 million households worldwide. By early 2012, this number had jumped to about 250 million. According to the AJE website, the channel's programmes can be seen on television in more than 100 countries on six continents" (Cherkaoui, 2015: 83). The channel truly came to light during the Arab Spring uprisings and received multiple international accolades for its fast-paced, daring, and accurate coverage.

Another success story was the launch of AJ+, Al Jazeera's first social media start-up, in 2014. This has grown immensely in the past eight years mainly because of a content strategy that puts the audience first and sees social networks as the final destination for AJ+ content. Unlike other channels that use social media platforms to recycle their TV footage or to draw viewers to their websites, AJ+ sees the value in meeting its audiences where they are and keeping them there.

The audience is estimated to comprise over 11 million fans on Facebook, over 1 million subscribers on YouTube, and over 1.2 million followers on Twitter. Their videos have been viewed over 8.5 billion times. AJ+ is one of the biggest video publishers on Facebook and has expanded into Spanish, Arabic and French-speaking markets. International recognition for the quality of AJ+ work has won the platform several awards since its launch ("Al Jazeera Digital scoops 35 medals", 2020).

A big flop: Al Jazeera America

After a resounding success in covering the Arab Spring uprisings, the network's executive management received encouraging signals to venture into the American market. AJE was still expanding overseas via traditional means (terrestrial, satellite, cable), and its online arm was buzzing with activity. Interest in AJE's programmes was high and more than 50% of AJE's Internet traffic was US-based. "During the first two days of the Egyptian chapter of the Arab Spring, Livestream viewers watching AJE over the internet increased by 2,500 per cent to 4 million, 1.6 million of them in the United States" (Reuters, 2011).

These encouraging signs enticed Al Jazeera to hedge its bets and launch a new channel within the United States. However, the network's management did not seem to have gone through an exhaustive due diligence process. Nevertheless, the decision was taken to proceed ahead. On 2 January 2013, Al Jazeera surprised the world by announcing the purchase of Al Gore's Current TV channel and re-branding it as Al Jazeera America (AJAM). The cost of the acquisition was alleged to be around US\$500 million.

While Al Jazeera thought that it was cutting corners via such a purchase by instantly accessing around 60 million television sets across the US, the network had no idea what it had stepped into. Many cable providers swiftly dropped Current TV from their bouquets. Others expressed their apprehension about this deal in the media. All this noise, combined with enormous flak against the Qatar-based

network all over traditional media and social media, seriously dented Al Jazeera's chances of gaining new audiences. Worse still, as part of the deal, AJE had to drop its internet streaming operations in the US, which meant the channel lost hundreds of thousands of dedicated viewers.

Editorially, AJAM was established as a standalone entity with its own editorial line and priorities. Importantly, instead of building on AJE's unique global south voice and daring coverage, AJAM adopted a more apologetic stance. Commenting for the Los Angeles Times, Mary McNamara reviewed the channel after it went on air. She described AJAM as a channel on a mission: "Al Jazeera America is going to out-America everyone." For her, instead of sticking to its guns, AJAM was defensive, trying to defend the brand while offsetting suspicions and antagonisms in the US towards Al Jazeera (McNamara, 2013).

Despite some outstanding recruits and programmes, AJAM's ratings remained dreadful. A year after its launch, the channel could barely attract 15,000 viewers on average in prime time (Shafer, 2014). This poor performance coincided with internal strife at AJAM, with some executives resigning and bringing lawsuits against the organisation's CEO for alleged sexism, anti-Semitism, and what was described as a "culture of fear" (Kludt, 2015). Ultimately, after several strategic, managerial, and operational missteps and spending about US\$2 billion at a loss, AJAM decided to close its doors in 2016 after just three years of operation. Around 800 journalists lost their jobs (Hagey and Flint, 2016).

Key events: Reportage and representation

Desert Fox (1998)

Merely a couple of years after its launch, Al Jazeera was fixated on creating a name for itself among the media powerhouses renowned for war reporting. The opportunity first came in December 1998 with the US/UK joint bombing campaign codenamed Desert Fox. Keen to publicise the anticipated high human cost involved, the Iraqi regime authorised Al Jazeera to provide live coverage of the bombardment from Baghdad. This was the only international TV station to broadcast the military operation (Bahry, 2001).

Such a move burnished Al Jazeera's credentials, as CNN relied partly on footage from the Qatar-based network for their coverage. It is interesting to note the irony. Six years earlier, it was CNN that had exclusive coverage from Baghdad during the 1991 War on Iraq. It was argued that having a transnational Arab television network spending much of its airtime covering the skyline of Baghdad added a new dimension, namely the real-time exposure of attacks against civilian targets. Some observers speculated that Al Jazeera's reporting from the Iraqi capital led the Pentagon to reduce the timeframe of Desert Fox operations.

The Palestinian Intifada (2000)

The second Palestinian Intifada (also called al-Aqsa Intifada) provided Al Jazeera ample opportunity to shine internationally. On 28 September 2000, the provocative visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Al-Haram Mosque in Jerusalem (the third holiest place in Islam) while surrounded by a large number of Israeli forces triggered instant protests from the worshippers. This move led to a cycle of popular unrest and police violence.

The day after, riots broke out in the West Bank and Gaza. In a short timeframe, dozens of Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army, and thousands were injured. Al Jazeera seized this opportunity and covered the events exhaustively, giving large airtime to the images of death and mayhem in the Palestinian territories. While Western television networks sanitised their reporting and toned down the disproportionate level of violence inflicted on innocent civilians by the Israeli army, Al Jazeera went in the opposite direction, airing all sorts of graphic footage that revealed the gruesome realities of living under occupation.

As a result, the Qatar-based channel enhanced its reputation as a credible source of information in the Middle

East. They also aired debates and documentaries about the Intifada that gave significant coverage to the plight of the Palestinians. Reporting the Intifada proved to be a catalyst for Al Jazeera in terms of increased audience numbers and ratings revenue. In turn, this coverage also gave the Intifada a pan-Arab audience. Vivid footage of the young Mohammed al-Durra being shot near his father inflamed pro-Palestinian passions from Morocco to Oman, becoming a defining moment for anti-Israel opposition throughout the Arab world [4].

The 2001 War on Afghanistan

The terrorist attacks of September 2001 gave Al Jazeera the opportunity to adopt a global profile. These events and their aftermath inflamed world opinion and increased the demand for television news footage and reportage that provided more clarification for millions of viewers worldwide. Because Osama bin Laden chose the network to provide his statements, they became the centre of media attention [5]. Al Jazeera's graphic coverage of American airstrikes in Afghanistan and the circulation of bin Laden's videotapes represented a public relations problem for the Bush administration.

The late Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld reacted by labelling Al-Jazeera a "mouthpiece of al Qaeda and a vehicle of anti-American propaganda" (Gorder, 2010: 1). In the 2004 State-of-the-Union address, US President George W. Bush described the Qatar-based outlet as a source of "hateful propaganda." Meanwhile, Rumsfeld, called its coverage of the War on Iraq "vicious, inaccurate, and inexcusable." However, such accusations were not supported by evidence. Al Jazeera aired five hours of Bin Laden videotapes over a four-year period, whereas President Bush's live broadcasts exceeded 500 hours (Miles, 2005: 360). Other studies revealed that over 90 percent of all official statements screened on Al Jazeera in a one-year period after 9/11 were made by US officials or their allies (Wildermuth, 2005).

The 2003 Invasion of Iraq

This 2003 US-led war on Iraq was undeniably a defining moment of the 21st Century. Powerful neo-conservative strategists and think tanks positioned this endeavour within an agenda of US supremacy over Middle East politics and economies. A simple formula prevailed: "global

dominance is impossible without Middle East dominance” (Everest, 2004: 235). The war’s prosecution and representation via US media-military networks became globally challenged by Al Jazeera.

While it is now widely acknowledged that the US administration used flawed and false information to justify the 2003 war on Iraq, Al Jazeera made sure from day one that its journalists would contest such propaganda. In contrast to the US networks’ “shock and awe” headlines, which made the conflict sound like a “Wild West” theme park, Al Jazeera ran the on-screen headline, “Baghdad is Burning,” as viewers watched the Iraqi capital receiving salvo after salvo of lethal ordnance. It depicted the US-led war as direct aggression against a weakened nation. The human cost of the war and the illegality of its prosecution were emphasised. After the fall of Baghdad, Al Jazeera used the term “occupation” rather than “liberation.” The channel was among the few media outlets that rejected allegations that Saddam Hussein or his close collaborators had been killed during the operation named “decapitation strike.” The event was described as an “assassination attempt.”

Al Jazeera and other non-embedded journalists soon suffered the Pentagon’s wrath. On 8 April 2003, US forces unleashed what seemed to be deliberate bombardments on independent journalists covering the war (FAIR, 2003). A US tank fired at the Palestine Hotel, where most non-embedded international reporters in Baghdad were based. Two journalists, Taras Protsyuk of Reuters and Jose Couso of the Spanish network Telecinco, were killed, and three others were injured. Earlier that day, US airstrikes targeted Al Jazeera’s offices in Baghdad, killing journalist Tareq Ayyoub on the spot. This sequence of events was one of the war’s darkest chapters. Al Jazeera positioned itself as the champion of news media freedoms in the face of a military goliath. Scores of Western journalists took note of the network’s ethos and performance, as it provided countless scoops out of the region. Subsequently, several Western news organisations established partnerships (Miles, 2005).

The 2011 uprisings

Al Jazeera gained further prominence from another defining news moment, namely the Arab Spring [6]. Using mobile phone and social media, skilled journalists with local knowledge, such as Rawya Rageh, Jamal Elshayyal, and Ayman Mohyeldin, conveyed the intensity of the uprisings, combining television coverage with viral social media and online blogging. This coverage gave an international dimension to events, which boosted the spirits of the demonstrators and encouraged more defiance. Jordanian Maisara Malass, an activist, described Al Jazeera as a

“media brigade” whose coverage had helped “to spread the revolution from one city to the other” (Zayed, 2011).

As a result, Al Jazeera’s viewership skyrocketed. A 2,500% increase in website traffic during the Egyptian chapter of the Arab Spring was announced. Overall, the network’s website attracted over 22 million visitors a month in early 2012. Google Trends data confirm this sharp increase, which exceeded 500,000 daily visits, compared to less than 100,000 daily hits previously.

Subsequently, Al Jazeera English won the Columbia University Journalism Awards in 2011 and the prestigious annual Peabody awards in 2012. It was praised as “a network of record for millions of viewers throughout the world” (McNally, 2012). Judges praised the channel’s “thorough, enterprising and brave” on-the-ground reporting (McNally, 2012).

Al Jazeera was euphoric when the Arab Spring started in Tunisia on 18 December 2010. The network had promoted democracy in the MENA region since 1996. By championing freedom of speech in the Arab World and providing airtime to opposition politicians and dissenters, Al Jazeera had helped to energise the Arab public sphere. As such, it was a constant source of pain for dictators in the region. Thus, when Tunisia’s dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was ousted on 14 January 2011, many of Al Jazeera’s veteran journalists felt this outcome was, in many ways, the fruit of their lifetime’s labour.

While such an intense personal involvement led to some excellent reporting on the ground, it also led later to some editorial slip-ups. It was clear that Al Jazeera gave more priority to the protests in some Arab countries compared to others. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen topped the priority list, whereas reporting on Bahrain and Oman was meek, if not absent (“Al Jazeera must do better,” 2013). Al Jazeera was soon entangled in the murky web of Arab politics, giving more airtime for some opposition groups in various countries but not others (Cherkaoui, 2014). The network’s Egypt reporting was the most criticised, attracting flak from various political players. Subsequently, it received the wrath of the military apparatus, which ousted the first democratically elected president of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, via coup d’état on 3 July 2013. A couple of months later (September 2013), a court ordered Al Jazeera to stop airing its programs in Egypt. Then in December 2013, three journalists working for Al Jazeera English (including Australian Peter Greste) were imprisoned by Egyptian authorities. They were subsequently sentenced (June 2014) and received seven to ten years’ imprisonment sentences. Peter Greste was released in February 2015 after getting massive support from international human rights organisations.

Al Jazeera and contemporary geopolitics

Saudi Arabia vs Iran

Al Jazeera emerged immediately after a change in Qatar's leadership in the mid-1990s, as the authorities opted for a more independent foreign policy free from Saudi influence. This shift has led to significant and recurrent pressures from Riyadh, especially once Al Jazeera had created a comparative advantage for Qatar over its neighbours in the media field. The network's editorial line, which consisted of airing controversial debates and exposing corruption and human rights abuses while promoting democratic values and pluralism, was not to the liking of the Saudi rulers. They have waged a protracted war via different methods. These include (but are not limited to) perpetual disinformation campaigns against Al Jazeera, harassing its journalists [7], scrambling its signal, obstructing its access to satellites, blackmailing sponsors and advertisers, and preventing pundits from collaborating with the network. The Saudis also launched a satellite television network—Al Arabiya to compete with Al Jazeera.

Such flak and intimidation did little to break the network's resolve and ambitions, quite the contrary. Al Jazeera often covered stories from a standpoint opposed to declared and tacit Saudi foreign policy. They opposed the 2003 War on Iraq, the Israel war against Gaza in 2006 and 2008-2009. However, the Arab Spring coverage was the straw that broke the camel's back. Several Saudi allies (e.g., Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak) were ousted by the masses, enraging Riyadh.

Nevertheless, some cooling-off phases occurred, such as between 2007 and 2011, when Al Jazeera refrained from any inflammatory coverage vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. While these periods usually do not last long, they cast Al Jazeera in a poor light. In fact, Al Jazeera's journalistic performance is inversely proportional to the warming of the Qatari-Saudi relations.

On the other hand, Qatar's wealth mostly comes from a natural gas field shared with Iran. As Tehran has been entangled in a protracted cold war with Saudi Arabia and its allies, the Qatari leadership pursues two strategic objectives in their foreign policy towards Iran: First, avoid being the target of Iranian subversive measures; and second, use Iran as a counterweight to Saudi hegemony in the region (Guzansky, 2015: 117). Accordingly, Al Jazeera's reporting

of Iranian affairs has generally been toned down, and its reporters have refrained from using any sensationalist or inflammatory tone of voice.

Conflict in Yemen

As a chapter of the Arab Spring, Al Jazeera's Arabic (AJA) covered Yemeni affairs prominently in its news, talk shows, and programmes. Quantitatively, they had more feature stories and talk shows focusing on Yemeni dynamics than the English sister channel (AJE). However, this does not mean that the reporting was subpar; AJE adopted a clear editorial line and gave as much prominence to the protests in Yemen as they did for other Arab Spring uprisings. Both channels covered the Yemeni government's crackdown on activists and the political ramifications, including the resignation of many dignitaries.

On Friday 18 March 2011 (also known as the Friday of Dignity), brutal bloodshed took place. Forces loyal to the President opened fire on peaceful demonstrators, killing scores of them. AJE covered the event and immediately conveyed the larger picture to its audience. The channel discussed the repercussions, potential reactions, and importance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mediation while maintaining coverage of the pro and anti-governmental camps. However, AJE's reporting often implied that the departure of the then President Saleh would boost democracy in Yemen.

As the conflict morphed into a civil war, after the Houthis abruptly seized control of the Yemeni capital Sanaa, a slow shift in Al Jazeera's editorial line occurred. Initially, as Qatar supported the GCC mediation efforts and was (more or less) aligned with Saudi foreign policy in Yemen, Al Jazeera followed a similar line. However, Qatar-Saudi relations soured following heightened diplomatic tensions and the withdrawal of the Saudi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahraini ambassadors from Qatar in March 2014.

In March 2015, the Houthis seized the Yemeni capital, triggering a Saudi/UAE joint intervention. At that point, given that Qatar-Saudi relations had reached an impasse, Al Jazeera's Yemen coverage became gradually critical of the Saudi/UAE-led war. Research demonstrated that the destructive aspects of the war increased from 4.5 per cent in 2015 to 32.6 per cent in 2019. In contrast, back in 2015, 43.5

per cent of the news articles in AJA had something positive to say about the military operations in Yemen. However, in 2019, only 2.1 per cent of AJA's news articles had any positive mentions about the Saudi-led coalition actions in Yemen (Mejalli, 2019: 60).

The blockade of Qatar

Diplomatic squabbles have a long history in the Arabian Peninsula. They are usually benign until they are not (e.g., Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait). Qatar's change of leadership in 1995 soured relations with Saudi Arabia for most of the next two decades. Doha's backing of the Arab Spring further irritated the Saudi/UAE axis. Therefore, tensions brewed between Qatar and other Gulf monarchies. Consequently, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014. Al Jazeera's pro-Arab Spring coverage was at the core of their objections. After rounds of negotiations, things returned to a semblance of normalcy in 2015.

However, in the final week of May 2017, a hacking operation took place against Qatar's official news agency (QNA), and a fake speech attributed to Qatar's emir was inserted into its website. The fake QNA report claimed that the emir had criticised the United States while praising Hezbollah and Hamas as resistance movements. The Qatari authorities denied the veracity of this fake speech, immediately took down the website, and launched an investigation with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Later, Qatar's attorney general issued a report revealing that the QNA hacking had been instigated by a neighbouring country (Cherkaoui, 2017a: 113-114). Despite official denials from the Qatari leadership and without waiting for any investigation, a quartet of countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) used the false quotes attributed to Qatar's emir as a *casus belli*. They cut diplomatic ties and initiated a blockade of Qatar's airspace, land passages, and shipping channels. This led to the disruption of existing supply chains and the immediate halt of food supplies. Meanwhile, Qatari nationals were expelled from the four countries, and their family connections and businesses paid a heavy toll. The quartet issued an ultimatum of 13 demands. Shutting down Al Jazeera was top of the list.

Qatar tapped into its soft power reservoir and mobilised its public diplomacy arsenal to underline the illegality of the blockade and spread awareness about it internationally. Qatar positioned itself as a victim bullied by its larger neighbours. With Al Jazeera at the centre of the blockade, international media NGOs, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), campaigned against this attack on media freedoms.

Al Jazeera's two channels were rather poised in their reporting. News reports broadcast full statements of the quartet and outlined the allegations against Qatar without censorship. The network's producers would seek commentary from Saudi and UAE officials, but the latter decided to boycott the Qatar based channel, thus renouncing their right to representation. Even so, Al Jazeera as a network invited various commentators from non-quartet countries to debate the issues at stake while putting forward the quartet's perspective.

On the other hand, there were no red lines when it came to reporting Saudi Arabia. For a long time, Al Jazeera walked on eggshells in its reporting of Saudi-related matters (Cherkaoui, 2014). The blockade was a gift for Al Jazeera news producers, who were critical of the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen. They were providing substantial airtime to the plight of civilians and the bombing of critical infrastructure ("Changing the channel," 2017). Also, leading members of the Saudi opposition were regularly invited to comment on episodes such as the grisly murder of Khashoggi (Cherkaoui, 2018: 141).

Then again, the blockade dented Al Jazeera's firebrand style of journalism from another angle. The network's investigative unit produced several international scoops such as "The Lobby" [7]. The latter resulted in a formal apology from the Israeli Ambassador to the UK and the resignation of an embassy official. The second part of this documentary was about the Israeli lobby in Washington. However, this broadcast was delayed indefinitely (Swisher, 2018). With the blockade straining Qatar's economy, the stakes were high. It is highly probable that the Qatari authorities pressured AJE to stop the documentary's broadcast, as several pro-Israel lobbyists campaigned relentlessly in Washington for this purpose (Tibon, 2018).

Reflections

Al Jazeera is a centrally important news organisation in the Middle East and beyond. It attracts large viewership and mobilises audiences in the MENA region, perhaps better than any government or political party. Qatar's government has shrewdly invested in this broadcasting network to enhance its international role. Brian Whitaker from The Guardian remarked that Al Jazeera "helped put Qatar on the map, politically and diplomatically" (Whitaker, 2011).

By adhering initially to the motto, "the opinion and the other opinion," Al Jazeera's anchors went on to explore controversial political, social, cultural, and religious issues in ways that were simply unthinkable at that time. Lively and far-ranging talk shows were a constant source of controversy and a perennial irritant for Arab autocratic regimes. Al Jazeera's Arab channel has, therefore, contributed to the reinvigoration of the Arab public sphere after decades of state censorship. The network's rationale was that access to public argument on a transnational level would inject oxygen into a public sphere that had been suffocated by dictatorships for decades.

Al Jazeera was often copied trans-regionally but never equalled. Considerable budgets were allocated to create Al-Arabiya (founded in 2003 by the Saudi rulers), Sky News Arabia (launched in 2012 by the UAE), and other networks to shift Arab public opinion. However, these outlets failed to reduce Al Jazeera's influence. The Arab Spring clearly demonstrated that the Qatar-based broadcaster was the most popular. Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal acknowledged that Al Jazeera was the channel of the masses, whereas Al Arabiya was the channel of the rulers (Khalijiya, 2013) [9].

Al Jazeera's popularity burnished the credentials and profile of many journalists across the region. Some left to create their own outlets and tried to compete with their former employer, but these endeavours were often ephemeral if not counterproductive. For instance, Hafez al Mirazi, ex-bureau chief in Washington, parted ways with Al Jazeera in 2007 to co-establish Al Hayat channel in Egypt. However, his plans fell apart shortly afterwards as this newly founded channel never took off. He then joined Al Jazeera's direct competitor, Al Arabiya, but was pushed out after merely questioning on-air the potential impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi Arabia. Former Tunisian journalist and Al Jazeera's bureau chief in Beirut, Ghassan bin Jiddo, who resented the uprising against Bashar Al Assad, resigned from the channel in protest against the pro-Arab Spring coverage, and went on to create Al Mayadeen,

a Hezbollah mouthpiece. Likewise, Egyptian investigative journalist and former host of Al Jazeera's popular monthly programme called "Top Secret" resigned in 2009 to join ONTV in Egypt (established by Egyptian business tycoon Naguib Sawiris) and help increase its audience. He covered the Arab Spring events from Cairo and managed to get some traction for his programme. However, his show was regularly censored, and he was let go by the channel in 2014 after General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi seized power in a coup d'état.

Al Jazeera was not just good at reinvigorating the Arab public sphere. It also gained reputation as a "war channel," covering several armed conflicts in Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iraq, and achieving some impressive scoops. In this context, the Qatar-based network became acknowledged as a major challenge to official discourses and embodied the contra-flow phenomenon. Al Jazeera launched its English channel, which provided excellent reporting during the War on Gaza in 2009 and the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria from 2011 onward. However, the picture has not always been rosy. There have been some serious issues in terms of providing balanced reporting, especially concerning Egyptian affairs post Arab Spring. It should be noted that, a few days after the toppling of Mubarak, Al Jazeera launched an Arabic-speaking channel completely dedicated to Egypt (24/7) called "Al Jazeera Live Egypt". This channel gave significant airtime to pro-Muslim Brotherhood viewpoints while overlooking other views whether from other opposition members or the government. AJA did not come out of this episode unscathed and lost many viewers in the most populous Arab nation who were disillusioned with the biased coverage (McEvers, 2013).

Al Jazeera's editorial choices have attracted the ire of autocrats in the MENA region as well as from other international actors, such as the United States. The Bush (junior) administration and its neo-conservative partisans often smeared Al Jazeera as "Terror TV" and "Bin Laden's mouthpiece." Indeed, the network's bureaus in Afghanistan and Iraq were bombarded. The network's bureaus around the world have often been closed, raided, and sprayed with bullets. In 2004, President George W. Bush mulled with the British Prime Minister the possibility of bombing Al Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar. Al Jazeera has had several journalists killed and imprisoned doing their journalistic duty across several locations worldwide. One of its cameramen, Sami al-Haj, was unjustly imprisoned in the infamous US-run Guantanamo Bay detention facility for six

years [10]. A decade later, the entire country (Qatar) was subjected to a straining three-and-a-half-year blockade by its GCC neighbours because of Al Jazeera.

The toll has been high, but Qatar has shown time and again that it is not ready to rein in the network and dent the credibility of such an important asset. During the blockade, Qatar's soft power played a significant role in weathering the crisis. In conjunction with the vast web that Doha has weaved across the business, academia, and cultural spheres, Al Jazeera proved its worth as an effective public diplomacy tool. Al Jazeera's newsrooms deconstructed and delegitimised the quartet's allegations against Qatar.

Nevertheless, Al Jazeera's senior management realised the high price Qatar paid for the network's preservation politically, diplomatically, and economically. Hence, the media organisation has endeavoured to continually enhance its commercial value by venturing into new markets effectively. Sometimes, these plans were very astute, as with Al Jazeera English (AJE) and AJ+ (the social media start-up). However, in other instances, the network's decisions were questionable at the very least (e.g., Al Jazeera America (AJAM), Rightly) [11].

Of late, the Qatari leadership has seemingly departed from its assertive foreign policy (2012-2015) and has been mending fences with its foes across the region. Qatar has reverted to what it does best, namely mediation and peace facilitation (e.g., Afghanistan with the Taliban). Consequently, Al Jazeera has also toned down its former Arab Spring rhetoric and refrained from amplifying recent protests in countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq. This has decreased pressure on autocrats in the region.

Al Jazeera keeps innovating to attract new audiences and retain existing ones. In the early 1990s, television was king of the media. However, things have radically changed since then. News consumption patterns are changing on a global scale. In June 2021, a YPulse survey revealed that thirty percent of Gen Zs and 26 percent of Millennials consider social media to be their main source of information (YPulse, 2021). The future success of international public broadcasting appears to rest on venturing further into new uncharted technological areas, fostering youth involvement and creating opportunities for two-way communication with audiences (by using influencers, nurturing local partnerships, as well as engaging with causes globally). While Al Jazeera can check off a few of these requirements, it still has some distance to go to be able to consolidate and enhance its market position, pan-regionally and internationally.

In the MENA region, the Arab Spring and its aftermath has led to "news fatigue." Many young audiences are no longer interested in following hard news with their daily imagery of death and carnage. Trans-regional media consumption patterns follow the global trends, and youth in the region are no longer stationary at home or in a café, consuming hours of news and analysis. To escape their grim realities, they prefer entertainment and have an overabundance of choice in this context. Thus, young audiences are now fragmented and filter the range of channels they wish to access. They also access content via mobile phones. This development has resulted in people narrowing their range of information sources. To attract these audiences, Al Jazeera will need to step up its efforts in terms of content, format, and choice of narratives.



People gather in front of Israeli Consulate General in Istanbul on May 12, 2022, to protest the killing of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh (Ali Jadallah - Anadolu Agency)

Endnotes

- [1] Qatar offered its mediation on many occasions, including in Yemen (2007-2008), Lebanon (2008), Chad/Sudan (2009), Ethiopia/Eritrea (2010), Sudan/Darfur (2010, 2013), Afghanistan (2010-2011, 2018, 2021), Chad (2022), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (ongoing).
- [2] According to Steve Clark, one of the key planners behind the establishment of AJE and the channel's first head of news, US-Qatari frictions affected to a large extent the delays in AJE's launch and the channel's subsequent trajectory (cited in Powers 2012: 13). Hugh Miles quoted an adviser to Qatar's emir, who "was adamant the delay was the result of American political pressure" (Miles 2005: 406). Other observers have hinted that the Bush Administration's pressure over Qatar in 2003 led to a reshuffling at the helm of Al Jazeera and the subsequent appointment of a new managing director and a new board of directors (Baatout, 2003). Among the publicised pressure tactics was the Bush Administration's downgrade of the status of planned visits by the Qatari foreign minister and the emir's wife, leading to these trips' cancellation.
- [3] By comparison, CNN, which considers itself as the most international American news channel, has only 31 bureaus overseas. See: Pew Research Center's Journalism Project (2016) Cable News: Fact Sheet. Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170419055510/http://www.journalism.org/2016/06/15/cable-news-fact-sheet/>
- [4] On 30 September 2000, the second day of the Second Intifada, 12-year-old Muhammad al-Durrah was killed in the Gaza Strip during widespread protests across the Palestinian territories against Israeli military occupation. Jamal al-Durrah and his son Muhammad were filmed by Talal Abu Rahma, a Palestinian television cameraman freelancing for France 2, as they were caught in crossfire between the Israeli military and Palestinian security forces. Footage shows them crouching behind a small structure. Muhammad is shown slumping as he is mortally wounded by gunfire, dying soon afterwards. For more, refer to: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/30/behind-the-lens-remembering-muhammad-al-durrah>
- [5] Western news networks had no qualms about interviewing terrorists before then. For example, during the 1985 hijacking of the TWA847 flight to Beirut, the head of the Lebanese Shiite militant group (Amal) was routinely interviewed by US news outlets, including the ABC network. He was invited to the ABC news shows and even gave his opinion about which story of the day was more newsworthy. Some hostage families labelled ABC as the "Amal Broadcasting Corporation." Osama bin Laden himself was interviewed before by Western journalists, such as Peter Arnett, Robert Fisk, and Peter Bergen.
- [6] On 18 December 2010, the Arab World was hit with a wave of demonstrations that started in Tunisia but soon spilt over into several Arab countries, leading to civil uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain. There were large street demonstrations in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Yemen, and Oman, and minor protests even in Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring protests were at first peaceful, but local and trans-regional autocratic forces, helped by the unreformed security apparatuses, soon transformed these non-violent demonstrations into civil wars such as in Libya, Syria, and Yemen
- [7] Al Jazeera's investigative journalist Tamer Almisshal and 36 of his colleagues were targeted via Pegasus spyware believed to have been planted by Gulf rivals (See: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/al-jazeera-journalists-threatened-tracked-and-blackmailed-via-their-phones/>).
- [8] The Lobby is a two-episode documentary produced by Al Jazeera that investigate the influence of the Israel lobby in the UK and the Israel lobby in the US and their relationship to the BDS movement. Using undercover techniques, the documentary relied on filming techniques unbeknownst to those being filmed. The first episode was broadcast on Al Jazeera in January 2017. Due to significant pressure, the second episode was never aired by Al Jazeera. Some of the themes had to do with the targeting of British politicians that hold pro-Palestinian views. Shai Masot, an official at the Israeli embassy in London, was recorded discussing his aim to "take down" British politicians, including Alan Duncan. Masot was also recorded setting up a pro-Israel youth organisation, which he

intended to link to the existing Labour Friends of Israel. Clinton Swisher, the then head of Al Jazeera's investigation unit, wrote an article in Forward Magazine accusing the network of capitulation to outside pressure. For more, refer to: <https://forward.com/opinion/396203/we-made-a-documentary-exposing-the-israel-lobby-why-hasnt-it-run/>. The first episode is accessible via this link: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/15/the-lobby-episode-1-young-friends-of-israel>

- [9] Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal launched in 2015 a new pan-regional channel called Al-Arab, which was headquartered in Manama, Bahrain. The channel's director was the late Jamal Khashoggi. After years of preparations, Al-Arab, which was meant to compete with AJA, was shut down after one day of transmission. The reason was that the channel invited a Bahraini opposition member to discuss Bahrain's political issues. Broadcasting was interrupted shortly after the interview. For more, refer to: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/02/saudi-prince-alarab-news-channel>
- [10] Al Jazeera Cameraman Sami al-Haj was captured by pro-US Afghan warlords following the fall of Kabul. He was then sold for 5000 US Dollars to U.S. forces in Afghanistan in late 2001. He was held in extrajudicial detention in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba for over six years and was released without charge on May 1, 2008. Following his ordeal, Al Jazeera requested him to lead the network's newly established department: the Public Liberties and Human Rights Desk. The desk's primary focus is to establish a specialised database for monitoring human rights abuses and raise public awareness of exactions.
- [11] Rightly was a social media platform funded by Al Jazeera to create content for the centre-right in the US. However, this project was a big flop, and funding stopped after one year of operation. For more information, refer to: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/jan/19/al-jazeera-rightly-conservative-media>

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