

Critical Books Review

Al-Jazeera, defiant and ambiguous mirror of the Arab world

LAMLOUM, O. *Al-Jazira, espejo rebelde y ambiguo del mundo árabe*. Barcelona: Editorial Hacer, 2006.

ISBN: 84-88711-86-7

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As a result of the attacks on the 11th of September, the west started to see, on a regular basis, the dissemination of messages from Osama Bin Laden by means of a channel that had been unknown before then by the great majority of westerners, Al-Jazeera, "Bin Laden's channel", in the words of the Bush administration.

The work we are reviewing here, *Al-Jazira, espejo rebelde y ambiguo del mundo árabe*, written by the Tunisian sociologist from the Université de Paris 8, Olfa Lamloum, goes beyond an analysis of the station itself and places it within the geographical and political context of the Arab world, providing the necessary keys to understanding the role played by Al-Jazeera internationally.

Al-Jazeera ('the peninsula', referring to the Arab peninsula where it is based, Doha, Qatar) was inaugurated on the 1st of November 1996. Initially it broadcast in literary Arabic only six hours a day, although by 1997 this had reached twelve hours and, since 1999, it has become a twenty-four hour information channel.

Currently, the network of Al-Jazeera television channels includes: the 24-hour news channel in Arabic (Al-Jazeera, 1996); two sports channels in Arabic (Al-Jazeera Sports +1, +2, 2003 and 2004); a channel on political life that broadcasts conferences in real time without editing or comment

(Al-Jazeera Mobasher); a channel aimed at children (Al-Jazeera Children's Channel, 2005); a 24-hour news channel in English (Al-Jazeera English, 2006), and a documentary channel in Arabic (Al-Jazeera Documentary Channel, 2007). Among its future projects is the creation of a channel in Urdu in order to reach Southeast Asia, as well as a music channel.

Al-Jazeera has more than 1,400 employees worldwide, 450 journalists of fifteen different nationalities (only 20% of the staff are from Qatar), 23 branches abroad and 60 correspondents.

A top class producer of audiovisual and news content at a world level, it has 24 daily news bulletins, 7 live debate programmes plus 15 recorded debate programmes and two websites in Arabic and English. It also reaches an audience of 35 million in the Middle East and 15 million in Europe and America.

The book is divided into three large parts, which can be read separately:

1. Al-Jazeera or singularity in the Arab world.
2. Al-Jazeera, a counter-power in the Arab world.
3. Al-Jazeera, a challenge for the United States.

In the first part, Lamloum provides the keys to success for the Qatar channel, referring to the relationship between Osama Bin Laden and Taysseer Allouni, the only television correspondent in Kabul during the Taliban regime. Allouni met Bin Laden after 9/11 in 2001 and interviewed him. This exclusive interview opened the door to the channel's international status and questioned the media monopoly of the United States. Olfa Lamloum refers exhaustively to the appearances of the leader of Al-Qaeda on the Qatar channel since 1998, as well as the pressure received by the channel from the United States. Al-Jazeera is the window that allows Bin Laden to appear to the world and this makes

it the most controversial channel, at the same time as gaining it credibility among its Arab and Muslim public. Does this make Al-Jazeera an accomplice to the violent and reactionary attitude of political Islam? The author believes that the channel does not condescend to Bin Laden: the leader of Al-Qaeda is one of several agents in the conflict. Notwithstanding this, the journalist Taysser Allouni was charged and imprisoned in Spain on the 17th of September 2003 by Baltasar Garzón, accused of "complicity with terrorism". Allouni was the first Arab journalist to notice a war declared by the United States and to obtain the first video recording of Osama Bin Laden. His reports were strongly opposed in the United States. On the other hand, Al-Jazeera undertook Allouni's ongoing defence, giving voice to the authorities that demanded his release and publicising the numerous citizen demonstrations and condemnation by journalist associations, until he was finally released, under bail and for health reasons, on the 23rd of October 2003.

According to the author, the key to the channel's success is its pan-Arab editorial line. Al-Jazeera has broken the taboo of the single, incontestable and indisputable truth of Arab regimes. The silenced discourse of the Arab world has found a way to express itself. Al-Jazeera has made Islamic, nationalist and feminist opponents audible and visible and has allowed them to explain their ideas, denounce corruption and, according to the author, claim public freedoms. Al-Jazeera has broken the monopoly of political announcements. It has broken the monopoly held until recently by western media. Arab TV viewers no longer have to watch CNN to follow the elections in the United States, nor the BBC to understand the elections in Iran, nor read *Le Monde* to follow the debate on banning the Islamic veil in French schools, etc. Al-Jazeera has pushed aside the information flow from the north towards the Arab world.

The author also points out programmes on the channel such as '*Against the current*', a talk show run by the secular nationalist and populist Fayçal Al-Qassim, which includes the televised political face-to-face model, banned in any Arab regime (video recordings of this programme can sell for up to 100 dollars a copy on the black market), or '*Testimony of the century*', a programme that invites and interviews important Arab and Muslim figures and compares their accounts with other sources and testimonies, or with the testimony of the viewers themselves.

Al-Jazeera claims a dual Arab and Muslim identity. It provides political and social cover for every country in the region. Lamloum points out that the Qatar channel has therefore become the means to express and produce the reality and identity of the public it addresses (more than 73% of its journalistic work is focused on Arab countries).

Is this nationalism dangerous? As the author says, we are seeing a new Arabism, with a nationalism that serves to shape repressed democratic aspirations and including an open Islamism component, which sees religion as an element of unification and resistance.

The second part of the book weighs up the historical context, the ambiguity in its relationship with the State of Qatar and the role of counter-power in the Arab world. Here the author reviews the history of the Qatar channel since it started (beginning with the closing down of the BBC Arabic News channel), up to the present day.

There are two desires involved in the creation of Al-Jazeera: that of a small country trying to become a distinctive regional redoubt, and that of Arab journalism, which wants television to be set free from Saudi Arabia and other authoritarian regimes.

Lamloum also notes that the channel combines three different political trends: an Arab nationalist trend, whose main representative is the Syrian Fayçal Al-Qassim; a liberal Islamist trend, embodied in the Egyptian Ahmad Mansour, and a liberal trend, personified by the Palestinian Jamil Azir. These three agree to handle conflicts in the Arab world from a pan-Arab nationalist perspective, to denounce the policy implemented by the United States, to publicise democratic aspirations and opposition to current regimes and adherence to a neo-liberal economic policy as a model of development and modernising for the Arab world.

In short, Al-Jazeera has provided an area of pan-Arab public opinion where democratic aspirations, Islamist controversies and resentment of the United States all have their place.

The author also covers the channel's ambiguous relations with Qatar. The channel does not openly criticise the Qatar government, unlike that of Saudi Arabia (is this one of its main functions?), but it does cover national controversies, talking about the existence of North American bases in Qatar and interviewing representatives from Amnesty International who are critical of the Qatar government.

Regarding Islamism, the author highlights the fact that the Qatar broadcaster has an open approach to all expressions of political Islam and has become the leading platform for transnational opinion opposed to repressive policy against Islamism. To the question of whether the strong presence of Islamism on the channel eclipses secular or left-wing currents, Lamloum answers specifically: although rejecting the systematic exclusion practised almost entirely by the Arab media (printed and broadcast), Al-Jazeera manages to standardise Islamism.

The author underlines the role played by the channel when defending the rights of women in the country's public sphere, denouncing gender-based violence, as well as its critical position against Islamist currents that deny women this right, without sparing the reactionary position of Kuwaiti and Saudi Islamists from criticism. The channel has dedicated various programmes to women's involvement in the public and political sphere and has a programme entitled '*For women only*' (*Lilnissâit faqat*), dealing with issues such as the role of women in political life and their role in Islamist movements. Toujane Al-Fayçal, a great figure in Arab feminism, has appeared on the channel's programmes several times to denounce Islamists in favour of gender discrimination and who deny women the right to participate. On the other hand, Lamloum highlights the relevant role of women in the work structure of Al-Jazeera, projecting a dynamic and positive image of women and opposing their exclusion on the part of any religious or political power.

Other issues tackled by Lamloum in this chapter are the particular treatment given by the channel to contemporary conflicts: the civil war in Algeria (the channel raised doubts as to the official version of events and revealed murky incidents), how Hezbollah is treated (for Al-Jazeera, it's not a pro-Iranian Lebanese Shiite militia but a Lebanese party working for national freedom), the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Al-Jazeera gives voice to Israeli leaders both from the right and left wing and shows the map of Palestine and Israel with the borders of 1967; the Palestinian people do not only appear as victims or as a historical reality but also as a "resistance", it dedicates programmes to Palestinian refugees and, at the same time, shows a Palestinian scenario fragmented by battles for power and corruption).

In the third part of the book, Lamloum talks about the channel's defiance of imperialistic order. The channel has

rejected the centrality of the concept of terrorism present in the North American discourse and makes a distinction between terrorism and resistance. It also questions the consequences of the "war on terror" and constructs a discourse different to the world's media consensus on this issue. In this way, it has shown the negative consequences of the "war on terror" among the civil population in the Afghanistan war, has led the United States to lose its monopoly in controlling the image of a conflict in which it was partly involved and has managed to invert the north-south flow of information and to raise doubts as to the myth of a "surgical war". The patriotic stance of the North American channels has contributed to the Qatar channel's success, something which has created a gap in the world media panorama, taken advantage of by media that are not dependent on the White House or not inspired by the same patriotism.

With regard to the war in Iraq, the influence of Al-Jazeera on the Arab world was revealed at the time patriotic activism became evident on the channel Fox News. Al-Jazeera eliminated from its discourse any reference to the terms used by experts from the Pentagon, such as "coalition forces", "pacification zones", "neutralisation of pockets of resistance", instead talking of "invasion", "occupation" and "resistance". In addition to the words chosen, there are also the images broadcast, such as the corpses of North American soldiers (when the North American media decided not to show any) and interrogations of prisoners of war.

Given the hegemony of the United States in interpreting the conflict, Al-Jazeera creates an alternative discourse based on images that discredit the empire's version. All this has not been easy and the author mentions different pressures on the channel that range from intimidated journalists to the destruction of some of its offices (that of Kabul, in 2001, and that of Baghdad, in 2003) and the bombing of other offices (Fallujah, in 2004). But, at the same time, given the failure to set up media in Arabic that are financed and controlled by the United States, the Bush administration has always taken advantage of its chances to appear on the channel in order to disseminate its message and attempt to win over Arab viewers.

Lastly, Al-Jazeera has led to other channels appearing in the zone, such as Al-Arabiya (created at the beginning of 2003 with North American capital and a group of Saudi in-

vestors), Al-Hurra (created in 2004 by the North American administration), Al-Alam (created in 2003 by the Islamic Republic of Iran), Al-Manar (the channel by the Lebanese Hezbollah group), among others. And it should also be noted that Al-Jazeera has inspired other stations such as the news channel TeleSur, inaugurated at the end of 2005 and sponsored by Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba and Uruguay, which has signed a cooperation agreement with Al-Jazeera to exchange content, technical experience and journalist expertise.

In short, this is a thorough piece of work, agile and easy to read (141 pages documented with great precision), which provides the necessary tools to be able to understand the complexity and role played by Al-Jazeera both in the Arab world and internationally. This book is very useful for those who wish to have an intelligent balanced approach to the Qatar channel, destined to be an inexorable voice in the world of information.

Related books

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