IS THE ARAB STATE
BROADCASTING IN CRISIS?
AL-JAZEERA TV CHANNEL AND
THE POWER OF FREE SPEECH

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play in constructing a public opinion. His current research work involves
an in-depth study about Al-Jazeera satellite channel and the way it has
scooped its rivals and initiated a change in the face of broadcasting in the
Arab world.

Introduction

Television broadcasting from and into the Arab world has changed
dramatically since the proliferation of satellite transmitters. The 1990's
are very much different from the 80s and the 70s. Strong players in the
region lost their supremacy over Arab media, thus on having the same effect
that Nationalist propaganda used to enjoy during the 60s and 70s. Egypt
no longer has the most powerful transmitters in the Arab World. Its radio
broadcasting (Voice of the Arabs) that attracted millions in the region under
former president Jamal Abdun-Naser lost its supremacy to regional
broadcasting stations after his death and the crumbling of the Arab nationalist
project led by Egypt and Syria. It is widely believed in the Arab world and
beyond that private television satellite channels, headed by Al-Jazeera, have
weakened Arab audiences' interest in radio listening as well as in Arab
states' television broadcasts. Also, attraction to such Western services like
Radio Monte Carlo, the BBC, and VOA, which used to satisfy some of the
needs of a large Arab audiences in the Middle East and North Africa, have
been replaced by Arab satellite TV channels (mainly private) broadcasting
free on-air (to start with), and received by tens of millions in the Arab
world and in Diaspora.
During the last four decades of its existence in the west, the Arab community relied heavily on Western broadcasting services as a source of news and current affairs as well as entertainment. However it has been argued that since the beginning of the 1990s, Arab audiences have changed their viewing habit with the gradual introduction of Arab satellite channels beaming from or into Europe. The emergence of MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Centre) in 1991 marked a turning point in the appearance of what could be called the Arab Diaspora's media. MBC followed by ART (Arab Radio and Television) and others attracted millions of viewers in the Arab countries and in Diaspora. However the emergence of the satellite TV channel Al-Jazeera (broadcasting from Qatar) seems phenomenal. Its unprecedented independent editorial policy, variety of discussion programmes giving a platform to opposing opinions, its seemingly unequalled news coverage of world events from an 'Arab perspective' seems to have heated up competition among Arab broadcasters in order to secure their share of audience attention. The success of Al-Jazeera was due to the good training of its journalists, generous financing, the use of up to date technology and the open editorial policy and unprecedented freedom of content on Arab television.

This paper looks into the crisis facing Arab state broadcasting and the reasons for the popularity of Al-Jazeera at the expense of private as well as state TV satellite channels. A case study about audience's reception of Arab satellite channels will be drawn up from a survey the author conducted during the summer of 2001 on the Arab community in Britain. Also, this paper will investigate the pressure that the free wheeling station (Al-Jazeera) faced since its inception in 1996.

**Emergence of Arab TV Satellite Channels**

Before 1960 the Gulf countries (Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) were like the North African countries (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Libya), initially slow in developing radio services, and were therefore vulnerable to radio propaganda from countries such as Syria, Iraq, and Egypt which had political interests in deposing the Gulf ruling families and spreading their hegemonies to the other parts of the Arab world. However the Gulf countries managed during the 1960s and 1970s to develop Radio Broadcasting services as they realised the potential of such a medium in preserving their thrones and maintaining the status quo. After the 1973 war and the dramatic increase in oil prices, the Arab oil producing countries found themselves in an even better position to get their message across through acquiring more equipment and expertise. The Arab countries managed to launch the first Arab satellite system (ARABSAT) in 1985 after a meeting of the Arab Gulf ministers of information. The aim was to link...
the electronic media in the Gulf States. Egypt was the first Arab country to have its own satellite system (NILELSAT) in 1998, thus marking a new era in the Satellite communication in the region. During the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s the Egyptian film industry was a major exporter to the Arab world. Until similar efforts from National TVs and film industries in various Arab countries started to produce for their local markets, Egyptian films overwhelmed Arab audiences with Egyptian culture. No other accent is better understood in all Arab countries as that of Egypt. Even Egyptian slang and vocabulary crept into the spoken Arabic of the rest of the Arab world.

It was during the 1990s that all the Arab countries managed to launch their own state satellite channels. The main aims were 1) to enhance national prestige; 2) to promote national interests; 3) to attempt religious or political indoctrination, and 4) to foster cultural ties. The Arab TV satellite channels can be classified into two categories: state owned and privately owned. As for the state owned TV satellite channels; they primarily targeted citizens from their nation states living in the Diaspora. This included long-term immigrants as well as those who migrated for a short period of time in order to work or study abroad. The aim was to maintain a link between those immigrants and their countries of origin. Programmes like 'Hamzat Wasl' (Linking Point) on the Tunisian satellite channel tended to serve as an arena for communication between immigrants and their local culture. However, tight editorial control is placed on the content, guests, and angles from which programmes are handled. Also, these channels tend to serve as political propaganda promoting the ideologies of the ruling governments. Competition, therefore, has been fierce especially after the proliferation of private channels where the opposition parties, who are often denied the right to voice their views about the political order in their countries, resort to various other international media outlets.

The first Arab country that started satellite broadcasting was Egypt launching in 1990 the Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC). Then throughout the 1990s all the other Arab countries managed to have their own state run TV satellite channels. These include Tunisia's Tunis-7, Libya's Al-Jamahiria, and the state owned channels of Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Oman, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, and Qatar. All these channels, however, broadcast their programmes in Arabic only except Libya's Al-Jamahiria, which translates some of its main news programmes into French, and Nile TV International (established in 1994 and owned by the state of Egypt), which broadcasts both in French and in English. Complete editorial control is placed on these state channels by the Ministries of Information and Media, even sometimes by the Ministries of the Interior (Home Office). Recruitment of journalists, presenters and technicians is purely the business of the Ministry of Information, and managerial positions are the business of the president where only candidates from the ruling party can be admitted.
As for the privately owned channels, they tend to target general Arabs diasporas in addition to Arab viewers in the Arab countries. The first among these is the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), the London-based Arab TV satellite channel, which started broadcasting in September 1991 and later moved to Dubai (in 2002) due to financial constraints. It is owned by Saudi businessmen and its programmes content vary from soaps, entertainments to documentaries and news and current affairs. Arab Radio and Television (ART) started broadcasting from Italy in October 1993 with one channel on Arabsat, and owned by Salih Kamil (a Saudi businessman). Orbit, owned by Al-Mawarid group from Saudi Arabia, started its pay-TV service in 1994. The Qatari royal family initially funded al-Jazeera, an atypical Arab TV satellite channel, broadcasting from Qatar in Arabic, yet it claims independence from the government. It started broadcasting from Doha in November 1996, and specialises in News programmes and current affairs. Because of its peculiarity, it has been argued that since then it has been attracting more and more audiences. Al-Jazeera emerged as a channel broadcasting 24 hours in classical Arabic, the language understood by everyone in the Arab countries, as well as Arabs diasporas, regardless of their religion, culture and way of thinking. Al-Jazeera came out after the collapse of the partnership between the BBC TV Arabic service, and the Saudi government. The conflicting approaches to content made this partnership short-lived. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, by now (since 1996) Amir of Qatar, seized the opportunity to fill in a gap in the market by employing the technical infrastructure and the senior staff of the defunct service; he was able to establish a distinctive Arab satellite channel broadcasting from Qatar rather than London. An initial amount of $150 million was provided as a five years loan from the Qatari ruling family to establish the new channel.

Attracted by competitive salaries, Arab journalists, editors, broadcasters, engineers, etc. were recruited from different Arab as well as western countries. About five hundred employees working in Al-Jazeera now come from diverse political and religious backgrounds. From the very religious to the extremely secular, Muslims as well as Christian employees work side by side in the various departments of the television station. The Audiovisual Media law passed by the Lebanese parliament in 1994 and put into effect in September 1996 broke the monopoly of the state on radio and television broadcasting in Lebanon. Therefore private channels broadcasting from Lebanon emerged for the first time from inside an Arab country. LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation), owned by Christian militia, Future TV, owned partly by the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, and al-Manar TV run by Hizbullah in Lebanon started broadcasting freely to the Lebanese audience in and outside Lebanon and attracting some of the Arab viewers in diaspora. The
Arab News Network (ANN), owned by Rifat Al-Asad (brother of the former president of Syria), entered the market in May 1997. Like al-Jazeera, it specialises in news and current affairs programmes, and broadcasts from London through Eutelsat and Arabsat.

**What the Arab Audiences are Watching? Case study: UK Arab Community.**

In a survey, the author conducted during the summer of 2001, on the Arab community in UK⁶, the following results portrayed a major supremacy of Al-Jazeera channel among Arab viewers as compared to both Arab state as well as private channels. The sample included 146 respondents (males and females from the age of 34 onward) and constructed from the various venues where an existence of the Arab community is mainly found: like Arab weekend schools, community centres, mosques, national clubs, student clubs and Arab shops and cafes in Edgware Road and Queensway areas in London. The Arab audiences preferences and interaction in relation to Arab television channels is summarised in the following survey results.

(a) Ownership of Satellite Television Service and Respondents' Exposure to it.

To find out whether people have a satellite TV service in addition to their terrestrial service, they were asked the following questions: 'Do you have a satellite TV service?' and, 'If yes is it digital or analogue?' About
75% acknowledged that they have satellite TV service, most of whom said it was digital. However a substantial number of respondents (25.%) said they did not have a digital service. As these respondents continued to answer the survey questions, they were asked how they watched the satellite channels. A few (6.9%) said they watched them at their friends' places, and 10.4% said they watched them on the Internet. In order to find out which Arab TV channels respondents include in their service, the following question was put forward to them: 'Which satellite channels do you have in your service?'. They were presented with a choice of the 20 best-known satellite channels, and an option of ‘other’ was available for them to add more names if their bouquet extended beyond the ones mentioned. As indicated in table1, more than 50% of the respondents have access to the Arab channels mentioned above. Almost 93% among them indicated that they receive Al-Jazeera as it was available on both analogue and digital services at the time when this survey was being conducted. Whereas the smallest proportion, 38% watch ART, as it is part of a bouquet through subscription, a high proportion of respondents, according to this table, entertain the privilege of having most of the Arab satellite channels. Therefore, it seems that the state as well as the private channels seem to be competing on equal terms to win the favour of the Arab audiences.

(b) Programme preferences by the Arab Community

The numbers across each programme category (in the graph above) reflect the number of responses to each programme from among a total of 470 responses. The number of responses was generated from the total number of people, i.e. 139 (respondents who answered this particular question) in the survey. A fundamental characteristic of the Arab community in the United Kingdom is its support for the Palestinians' struggle for a free country and the right of return of the Palestinian refugees. Also, a common feature among
them is their criticism of the lack of freedom of expression in their countries of origin, censorship of the media and absence of real democracy in political life. A high percentage of them (about 55%) are refugees who came to this country in different waves of immigration. Issues of political and religious persecution reflect themselves in their everyday concerns, and therefore in their choice of television programmes. Therefore, Al-Jazeera has scooped Arab broadcasting (as it will be shown later from the survey results) because it covers the kind of topics that others do not. Its engages viewers in various hot and taboo issues in the Arab world: from human rights abuse, to debates about democracy, women's rights in Islam, to the Palestinian intifada (uprising). Operating as a kind of Arabic CNN with news bulletins on the hour, Al-Jazeera's strength lies in its wide coverage of uncensored news and current affairs from around the world, debate programmes, special documentaries, and one-on-one interviews with personalities with opposing views most of whom would not get a hearing on any other Arab station. Its programmes have appealed to a hunger among its Arab audiences for democracy and freedom of expression that has been suppressed by decades of state control over all media outlets in most of the Arab countries with a few exceptions such as Lebanon.

On programmes like 'The Opposite Direction' anchored by a Syrian Presenter, Faisal Al-Qasim, 'Without Limits' conducted by Ahmed Mansoor, and 'The Other Opinion' conducted by Sami Haddad, a Lebanese presenter with long experience in the BBC, Al-Jazeera opens the floor for free and often noisy debate on some of the most sensitive issues in Arab society. A particular stormy issue on 'The Opposite Direction', for example, was a debate in which Dr. Moncef Marzouqui (one of the opposition leaders in Tunisia, and the President of the National Council for Human Rights) criticised the 'absent role of the Arab parliaments'. He was placed in opposition to Noureddine Boushkouj (Secretary General of the Arab Parliaments) who defended the role of these bodies. Other Arab channels would not even consider screening such discussions, which result in floods of telephone calls and may even encourage protests in the streets and criticism in the press. In order to get its audiences back, and therefore attract advertisers, MBC (the Middle East Broadcasting Company) has, since last year, adopted the format of ITV's popular programme 'Who wants to be a Millionaire?' (originally owned by an American TV station). It also attempts to open up its airtime to more diverse views, yet it is still restrained by the editorial policies of the Saudi princes who fund it. It is clear from graph (2) that soaps and entertainment programmes are the least appealing to the Arab viewers covered in this sample, in comparison to News and Current Affairs programmes. Only 17 responses from among the respondents prefer soaps and 23 among them prefer entertainment programmes. News heads the list, as it attracts 121 of the viewer's responses, and religious programmes have a share of 96 from their responses, followed by 87 to the political programmes,
73 to documentaries. This data explains the swift popularity of Al-Jazeera soon after its launch in 1996. Other channels, broadcasting from outside the Arab countries, have not managed to attract such a wide viewing public, though in the case of MBC it started broadcasting long before Al-Jazeera. Furthermore, most private channels that are entertainment based do not have a discourse very much different from that of the Arab state channels.

(c) Reasons for switching to private satellite channels:

133 (91.7% out of the total number of 145) respondents follow their favourite programmes on satellite channels in one way or the other. Graph (3) shows the reasons why Arab Viewers opt to switch to a satellite TV service. A proportion of 44% chose to have a satellite service in order to watch specific channels. In the UK, Arab satellite channels can be received on Hotbird and W2. Elsewhere channels can be received on Nilesat, Hotbird, and Eutelsat. State satellite channels are freely available on air, as are most of the independent channels, like Arab News Network (ANN), IQRA, Middle East Broadcasting Company (MBC), Arab Radio and Television (ART), and Al-Jazeera. However, some have introduced membership fees as they moved to W2 in the case of Al-Jazeera. Yet all these channels can be received through a digital service, which is not necessarily part of a bouquet (as in the case of ART). A percentage of 10.4% is a reasonably significant proportion representing those who frequently follow the satellite channels through the Internet. Most of them are among the elite: students, professionals, academics and researchers. However, their preferred channel is most probably Al-Jazeera as it was the only Arab channel that runs live broadcasting on its web page. It has been argued that www.aljazeera.net (the official website of Al-Jazeera satellite channel) has made considerable progress since its launch on the 1\textsuperscript{st} of January 2001. During the year 2001, the activity of the site attracted 38 million hits, and more than 265 million pages viewed (Graph
no: 4). The site provides daily international news analysis, special documentaries, portrayal of Arab and foreign press, in addition to transcription of most of the discussion programmes, book reviews, and special reports. Membership of the site has reached 80 thousand, who normally have the right to live participation in TV programmes through the net, and they receive the daily newsletter through their e-mail service.

After the 11th of September 2001, Al-Jazeera net became even more popular and the number of visits to the site substantially increased. During the month of October, the pages viewed soared from 600,000 per day before the 11th of September to more than one million pages per day. By the beginning of January 2002 Al-Jazeera prides itself on having 70 million page views per month. The Graph above figures for its web-page popularity during its first year (2001).

(d) Preferred Arab TV Channels:

In order to find out their most preferred channels, respondents were asked to "rank the following channels in order of importance to you. Number them from 1= most important, to 5= less important". The figures allocated for each channel in graph (5), signify the number of people out of 131 respondents who chose it as their most preferred channel. For example, 73 out of 131 preferred Al-Jazeera. The second in the list is IQRA channel which was chosen by a total of 27 people to be number 2. There are four channels in position 3: Abu Dhabi, ANN, Dubai, and MBC. As for the state channels they hold position 4 and 5 in viewers' interests. It has to be made clear here that results in this table convey the first five positions. As the
sample covered a variety of nationalities, many respondents placed their national state channels in the fourth or fifth position after placing their favourite ones in the first three positions (mainly the private channels).

(The percentage in the Graph above shows the number of responses to each channels from among 131 respondents included in this survey; for instance 47% represents the number of responses among the respondents who chose Al-Jazeera as their most preferred channel)

The popularity of Al-Jazeera was apparent among the Arab Diaspora community in UK even before the 11th of September. A high percentage among them (48%) came to know about Al-Jazeera through the recommendation of a friend, and 38% said they knew about it through publicity (Graph no: 5).

From among the topics that these programmes covered and guests invited, during the last two years, are shown in the lists below. These programmes represent a sample randomly selected according to availability. But all of them illustrate the peculiarity of Al-Jazeera's programme content and the wide variety of its guest speakers.

1- Programme: Al-Ittljah Al-Mua'kis (Opposite Direction), produced and presented by Dr. Faisal Al-Qasim (Syrian), had his PhD in political science from Hull University in UK.

This talk show is one of the programmes, though controversial, helped earn Al-Jazeera popularity. It is similar to CNN 'Crossfire', as it often tackles
very hot issues in the Arab World and invites guests from opposite trends. The programme is broadcast three times a-week: Live on Tuesdays 6:35pm GMT, first repeat Wednesdays 11:35am GMT, second repeat Thursdays 11:35pm GMT.

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<tr>
<th>Programme Topic</th>
<th>Guest</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>The US's Undermining the World's Public</td>
<td>Kamal Abdul-Haq Tamimi: Muwafaq Harb</td>
<td>6&quot; July 2002</td>
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<td>Arab Leaders and the %99.99 of people's vote,</td>
<td>Dr. Issam Noureddinc: Lebanon University. Dr. Ahmed Al-Mannaii: President of the International Institute of International Relations: Paris</td>
<td>II&quot;1 June 2002</td>
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<td>The American Existence in The GIIIf</td>
<td>Dr. Ali Al-Tarrah: Dean of the school of sociology, University of Kuwait. Abul-Aziz Al-Khamis, Media expert Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>4 June 2002</td>
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<td>Legitimacy of Arab Regimes</td>
<td>Dr. Moncef Marzougi: President, Tunisian Council for Human Rights Amer Naffak, Lecturer, Fas University</td>
<td>9 April 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arabs and the Palestinian Cause?</td>
<td>Dr. Ghassan Attia (Arab League) Ali Abu Hassan: Lecturer (Aleppo Uni., Syria)</td>
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2- Programme: Al-Sharia' wal-Hayat (Religion and Life). Host: Maher Abdullah

The host invites notable Muslim scholars, namely Dr. Yussef Al-Qaradawi (originally from Egypt, and is the Mufti of Qatar) to discuss and analyse timely issue in the Muslim and Arab world through an Islamic perspective. The programme lasts for 75mn, and broadcast live at 6:30pm on Sundays, and repeated on Mondays and Tuesdays.

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<tr>
<td>Muslims' Duties Towards Palestine and Al-Quds (Jerusalem)</td>
<td>Sheickh Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi (Mufti of Qatar).</td>
<td>22 May 2001</td>
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<td>The Crisis of the Muslim <em>Ummah</em> and how to Overcome it?</td>
<td>Dr. Kamel Helbawi: Researcher in Strategic Thinking, U.K.</td>
<td>9 Nov. 2002</td>
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<td>The Way to the Revival of the Muslim Jarrar: Jordan University <em>Ummah</em> (Global Nation)</td>
<td>Dr. Mamoun</td>
<td>17 July 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Western Image about Islam</td>
<td>Sheickh Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi</td>
<td>2 Oct. 2001</td>
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<td>The Muslim's Values in the West</td>
<td>Sheickh Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi</td>
<td>6 Feb. 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Future of Islam in Western Europe</td>
<td>Dr. Bahij Mullah Huwaish (Spain)</td>
<td>8 May 2001</td>
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<td>Russia's War in Chechnia: War on Islam or Conflict of Interests</td>
<td>Badrudin Bino: Centre for Chechnian Stud.</td>
<td>7 Dec. 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islam's View on Racism?</td>
<td>Sheickh Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi</td>
<td>12 Sept. 2001</td>
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3- Programme: For Women Only: Host: Muntaha Arumhi

A discussion programme geared primarily towards women, Programme invited academics, experts, and women activists from various venues. Because of wide scope of its topics, this programme attracts a large male audience, which is clear from the phone in live participation.

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<td>The Influence of Foreign Funding; On Women's Issues</td>
<td>Dr. Nadia Mustapha: Cairo University, Hayat Attia: Journalist from Jordan, Dr. Raoufa Hassan: University of Yeman.</td>
<td>29 June 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women's Press</td>
<td>Ismat Musawi: Journalist, Iqbal Ahmad: Writer, Jordan, Aisha Sultan: Journalist</td>
<td>3 July 2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islamic Dress: A political Symbol Or a Fundamental Right</td>
<td>Dr. Aida Saifuddawla: Ain Shams University, Kahdija Mufid: Writer, Munjia Abidi: London.</td>
<td>5 June 2002</td>
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</table>
The Price of Free speech

1- How Al-Jazeera has been received in the Arab World?

From the outset Al-Jazeera was perceived as a rival by Arab state channels as well as the private ones. It has set a standard for quality broadcasting that has become like a barometer by which Arab audiences can compare various channels. Viewers have suddenly become able to assess balanced from imbalanced television coverage through the ability to switch between tens of satellite Arab channels. Al-Jazeera has also pushed the other Arab channels, namely the private ones broadcasting from Europe, to improve their content and broadcast quality also open up the scope of their operation to oppositional views. Therefore, in order to attract their audiences back, channels like, MBC (the Middle East Broadcasting Company) improved the quality of its news and current affairs programmes, and introduced new entertainment programmes a copycat of ITV’s programme 'Who wants to be a Millionaire?' It also attempts to open up its airtime to more diverse views, yet it is still restrained by the editorial policies of the Saudi princes who fund it. 'If we did not have Al-Jazeera, we would have invented its likeness'. Al-Jazeera has opened a hole in the silent wall of Arab state controlled media. It appeared for the first time that this Arab wall needs free speech for it to start crumbling down. 'Al-Jazeera has thrown a big stone in this stagnant sea'. Therefore, it has become impossible for this stagnant picture of Arab media to return to its original face.

However, its policy of portraying 'the opinion and its opposite' has earned it criticism and even wrath from across the Arab world. The attack on the channel started long before the events of the 11th of September. Kuwait's Information Minister flew to Doha to complain in person after a programme needled his government for its stand on Iraq. Algeria’s regime reportedly shut off electricity in parts of the country rather than allow Algerian television
sets to pick up a debate on the country's bloody civil war. The Jordanian government closed down Al-Jazeera's news bureau in Amman after a talk show guest accused the late King Hussein of collaborating with Israel. Tunisia's president called the Emir of Qatar to stop broadcasting a live programme discussing human rights abuse in Tunisia. The Moroccan Prime Minister, Abdurrahman El-Yousufi, accused Al-Jazeera of leading a campaign against the monarchy. He referred to discussion programmes broadcast on the channel that he saw as hostile to the monarchy which were tackling political corruption and had interviews with an exiled former army officer and a 1971 coup plotter against the late King Hussain. Morocco recalled its Ambassador in protest, although the Qatari Foreign Affairs Minister explained that 'Qatari media is free and we have no control over it'. He further argued that 'international television stations, newspapers and magazines are covering the Arab world much more than what we write about ourselves. Why be embarrassed when an Arab television station tackles our concerns?'

Recently Bahrain's Information Minister banned Al-Jazeera from reporting on the local elections that took place on the 9th May 2002. The government had been angered by the Al-Jazeera's airing of footage of the anti-American protests which were triggered by Israeli massacres in Jenin and the West Bank. Al-Hamr (information minister) said that the station is biased towards Israel and against Bahrain. We will not deal with this channel (he added) because we object to its coverage of current affairs. It is a channel penetrated by Zionists. Husni Mubarak of Egypt frequently attacked Al-Jazeera as it aired programmes criticising the Egyptian government and the conditions of human rights and democracy. Recently, President Mubarak and the Egyptian media have openly attacked Al-Jazeera as a channel spreading friction, enmity and instability in the Arab countries (Al-Jazeera news, 30th April 2002). Al-Jazeera is well known for conducting interviews with controversial figures that irk Arab governments. Earlier in October 2001 the Egyptian Information Minister again accused Al-Jazeera of hostility towards Egypt, and towards Arab unity. After visiting the station President Hosni Mubarak made the oft-quoted remark: "All this noise from this matchbox?" . 'We have to know who is trying to break up the ranks...(remarked the Information Minister) I may... stop all dealings with the Al-Jazeera channel concerning studios... satellite feeds or correspondents'. Nowadays, some of the pressures have gone, as Arab leaders have developed a love-hate relationship with the station. Some, such as President Salih of Yemen, readily denounce it but can't wait to appear on it. For Nadim Shehadi, of the Centre for Lebanese Studies in Oxford, the rise of Al-Jazeera is a lesson in the perils of censorship. "By trying to censor the BBC (Shehadi remarks), the Saudis created an opportunity for the creation of something that was much worse for them. If you try to censor, you don't know what is going to come out."
2- Response from Western Politicians.

Al-Jazeera came to the notice of Western politicians, journalists and academics when it broadcast in 1998 an interview with Bin Laden in which he called upon Muslims to target 'American interests', but especially after the 11th of September events, by continuously airing Bin Laden's version about the war in his speeches, it was praised by Arab as well as non-Arab observers as the first non-Western network to seriously challenge the Western monopoly on global news reporting, and therefore "to provide a much more inclusive perspective, which gives you everything you get on CNN plus everything you don't". The station's objectivity while covering the war in Afghanistan provoked angry comments by top American diplomats who demanded that Al-Jazeera should "tone it down". American politicians and journalists admitted that Al-Jazeera scooped the world and it became the primary source of news for Arab viewers. As Max Rodenbeck from the New York Times put it at the time; 'Gone is the time when Arabs had to turn for the truth to the BBC, as in the Six Day War of 1967... Some, like Al-Jazeera, rival and sometimes surpass Western models for the quality and timeliness of their reporting.'

Faced with "a battle for the mind" and the need to tell moderate Muslims that the U.S. isn't fighting Islam, The US even considered advertising on Al-Jazeera TV. Charlotte Beers, the State Department's chief of public diplomacy, said the State Department is investigating new ways to reach out. Among the possibilities: advertising on Qatar-based news channel Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera's airing of Bin Laden's tapes and its coverage of the war in Afghanistan from a different perspective made it pay a high price when the US army seemed to have deliberately bombed its Kabul office. Ibrahim Hilal (editor) said 'it had given the location of its office in Kabul to the authorities in Washington, yet on Monday night, its office was destroyed by a bomb that almost wrecked the nearby BBC bureau.'

The Al-Jazeera correspondent in Washington, Mohammad al-Alarm, was detained as he was on his way to cover the Russian-American summit in Texas. Police told him that the credit card of the Al-Jazeera office contained information connected with what was going on in Afghanistan (BBC News, 15th November 2001). The US government even planned to launch a TV station to rival Al-Jazeera. Initiative 911, put half a billion dollars into a channel that would compete in the region with Al-Jazeera, and that would be aimed specifically at younger Muslims who are seen as anti-American. Charlotte Beers, undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs said at the time: "If I have to buy time on Al-Jazeera, I would certainly consider it." Fierce competition to reach out for the Arab audiences, through the net, also led CNN to officially launch its Arabic website (CNNArabic.com).
in 19th January 2002, which has been operated from Dubai by Arab journalists from the region. The content of the site is complementary to CNN International. The Arabic service of 'Voice of America' (radio service) has also been suffering from a poor audience share in the Arab world. It has been estimated that only 1% to 2% of Arabs listen to it after the 11th September events. The American Congress, therefore, funded a renewed Radio Free Afghanistan. It had begun in the mid-1980s, when Afghanistan was under Soviet domination, but when the Soviets withdrew, the USA (mistakenly) thought the service was no longer 'needed'. Furthermore, in order to seek further influence on American as well as world public opinion, the Pentagon took the initiative of launching the 'Office of Strategic Influence' (OSI) in November 2002. The New York Times reported that the supposed rational underlying that office was to plant misinformation abroad. The NBC News also reported that the OSI had circulated proposals to disseminate explicitly false information in overseas news reports about US activities. The report went on to observe, that 'the plan called for a campaign of lies, coercion and influence against clerics, schools, and news organisations'. Under the storm of criticism that followed the report, Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, decided to shut down the OSI.

Technological developments in the last five years have placed a huge pressure on Arab governments to changes their communication and broadcasting policies. The proliferation of satellite broadcasting proved to be very instrumental in taking away audiences from the mainstream state broadcasters. Also, the events of IIth of September did not only change many things around us but also posed new challenges to the mainstream western media. Al-Jazeera's coverage of the war in Afghanistan and the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict turned out to be more than the American government could bear without fighting back. The battle to win the Arab and Muslim public opinion led it to launch a new media strategy at any cost. The interesting question that remains to be answered is whether the world super-power will put up with a daring English-speaking television satellite channel with the likeness of Al-Jazeera freely accessing the Western public opinion?
NOTES


7 Amjad, Nasir, 'Al-Jazcera, the channel that dares lo speak out', in *Al-Hadath Af-Dawli* (Arabic), p.17.


13 Whitaker, Brian (2001). Battle Station, in The Guardian, Tuesday 9th October,

14 Tiare, The Daily Star (Beirut), 7th February 2002.


19 Newton, N. Minow(2002). 'Mass media can battle mass destruction'. USA Today, 9 April, p. 15.