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**Al-Jazeera An Insider's View**  
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Satellite Channel  
AHMAD KAMEL

# Al-Jazeera

## An Insider's View

The events of September 11 and their aftermath brought with them the 'discovery' of Al-Jazeera by much of the world, due to its coverage of the war. The Arab-speaking world of course had known of its existence for 5 years. Arab-speakers had already asked the questions that are now being posed in the West: **What is Al-Jazeera's role? Who finances the station? What are its working methods and its style of coverage, especially of political events? What is its influence on viewers? What will be its future?**

Al-Jazeera is an independent channel, specialized in news, political debates and documentary programmes. Launched in 1996, Al-Jazeera comprised a team of Arab-speaking journalists from 20 countries, the majority being composed of former groups coming from the BBC Arabic TV and radio.

Al-Jazeera was launched with the aid of a government loan of 150 million dollars spread over a five-year period allocated by the Qatar government. On 1 November 2001, the 5-year period came to an end and Al-Jazeera now relies on a number of financial resources to pay back the government loan and to continue to broadcast quality programmes.

Its financial resources come from commercial advertising; income from cable TV in different Arab countries, Europe, and North America (Al-Jazeera is broadcasted via satellites and internet free of charge around the world); technical services offered to other channels and production companies by the Al-Jazeera offices found across the globe; and from the sale of exclusive images and documentary programmes produced by Al-Jazeera, as well as the sale of programmes for the public. Since the outset, its trademark has been its high level of professionalism, objectivity, independence and the importance given by the channel to the intellectuals and politicians regardless of their influences. A weekly survey on the Al-Jazeera website offers the public the opportunity to express itself and to ask questions directly to the intellectuals and politicians. Viewers participate in the debates by phone, fax, internet, or by personal presence on the programmes. The Al-Jazeera correspondents give the parties concerned, but also the public, the chance to comment on events and explain the basic facts.

From a socio-political and media point of view, the creation of Al-Jazeera was an important event in the history of the Arab world. From a media point of view, the Arab public now has an independent Arab source of information. For the past 50 years, Arab citizens have had the choice between media controlled by oppressive regimes, which means information that borders on pure propaganda, or foreign media (English or

French) in Arabic. The former being extremely want of information, the latter sources were the only choice for millions of Arab-speaking viewers, who desire non-biased information.

Since the 1950s, the Arab section of the BBC became the primary source of information for the Arab-speaking population, before sharing this position in the 1970s with the Arab section of Radio France Monte Carlo. Al-Jazeera liberated Arab viewers from this monopoly of occidental information.

### Social-political issues

Al-Jazeera has managed to abolish the censorship and propaganda reporting that was enforced on the political and social representatives as well as the intellectuals of the Arab world. It has obliged the Arab governments to broaden their views on freedom of expression and in numerous cases has become a source of influence speaking out against oppression and violation of human rights in the Arab world. Other Arab media have had to make an effort to improve their level of professionalism along with their freedom of expression and in some cases Al-Jazeera is seen as a model to follow in the Arab media world. The overwhelming popularity of the channel, the tone of liberty, and the possibility given to all of the intellectuals and politicians has been a thorn in the side of many of the non-democratic countries of the Arab world. It is for these reasons that these countries have attempted to shut down the channel through any means available, by exerting both financial and political pressure on Qatar and Al-Jazeera (four countries have ceased diplomatic relations with Qatar). Surprisingly enough, neither Qatar nor Al-Jazeera has changed the attitude it has adopted, Al-Jazeera staying free and independent giving each individual the right to express him/herself. Qatar continues its politics of non-intervention in the workings of Al-Jazeera, as well as the democratization of the country – a process which will be crowned by the legislative elections next year. Women will have the right to present themselves as candidates and will have the right to vote.

Not only dealing with pressure from hostile governments, Al-Jazeera was faced with hostility from its own audience. It has taken a number of years in order for the public to

accept the fact that there will be Israeli politicians and journalists with anti-Arab sentiments that will be allowed on the air to express their views. In addition to the hostility of anti-democratic governments and the misunderstandings of its own viewers, Al-Jazeera has also experienced a great deal of international pressure.

Ex-president Bill Clinton criticized Al-Jazeera's coverage of the Palestinian Intifada and especially the broadcasting of certain violent scenes of the use of excessive force by the Israeli army with respect to Palestinian civilians. In the aftermath of the September 11 events, international pressure has dramatically increased.

### Al-Jazeera, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden

Two years ago the Taliban government authorized two television channels in Afghanistan: CNN, being the most viewed channel in the West; and Al-Jazeera, the most viewed by the Arab Muslim population. The two channels started working in the beginning of the year 2000 with offices in Kabul. A few months later, CNN decided to close down its bureau due to a lack of interesting reports in Afghanistan and the cost of operating the bureau in Kabul. Al-Jazeera also had doubts on the usefulness of keeping a bureau in Kabul, but the supporters for this bureau managed to convince the head office and Al-Jazeera remained as the only channel working in a Taliban-controlled area. Al-Jazeera did not remain in Afghanistan due to privileged relations with the Taliban or Ben Laden for that matter, but rather because of its being the most watched and respected channel in the Arab Muslim world. CNN missed a historical opportunity to be at the right place at the right time.

The Taliban and Ben Laden are not the only ones who choose to communicate with the Arab Muslim world via Al-Jazeera; Barak, Perez, Blair, Solana, Robertson, Powell, Ramsfield, Rice, Mayer, Arafat, Khatami, Saddam Hussein, Castro, Kadafi, Heider, Vadrine, Georges Mitchell, and Kofi Annan have also chosen Al-Jazeera.

Certain individuals say that the correspondent in Kabul was pro-Taliban, but his presence in Kabul was necessary. His reports and images were the only ones being transmitted from Afghanistan. Al-Jazeera's camera was the only one relaying images during the bombing by the Americans. The Arab viewers and the viewers around the world are intelligent enough to realize that the journalist in Kabul was not completely 'free'. This is the same situation for any correspondent working in a country where censorship is applied. The viewers would have also seen that after every report coming from Kabul Al-Jazeera gave the American and Northern Alliance points of view, thus creating equilibrium. Some critics hold that Al-Jazeera does not have a correspondent in northern Afghanistan, however Al-Jazeera was in the North via the correspondents from CNN who were working for Al-Jazeera under a special agreement signed with CNN. Al-Jazeera gave ample opportunity to the Northern Alliance to express its views via telephone or during trips outside of Afghanistan.

Faithful to its policy – namely freedom of expression for all – Al-Jazeera did not hesi-

tate to diffuse the videotapes sent to the bureau in Kabul by Ben Laden, since he is one of the major actors in this conflict. Al-Jazeera did not want to get dragged into a dispute with the Americans over good and evil but wanted to keep its independence and objectivity by just reporting the facts. Al-Jazeera has treated this war as any other, a political conflict. It gave ample airtime to the Americans to express their views and broadcasted all of the President's and ministry press conferences voiced over in Arabic. Numerous Americans have been received on daily news broadcasts as well as in live debates. This same opportunity was given to the anti-Taliban and anti-Ben Laden Muslims and politicians of any belief.

Having experienced problems in finding individuals who could explain and defend the ideology behind Al-Qa'ida, it was logical for Al-Jazeera to diffuse Ben Laden's videotapes. Two videotapes of Ben Laden were received and two from his collaborators. The first videotape of Ben Laden was diffused a few hours after the bombing by the Americans had begun. The following three tapes were edited by Al-Jazeera to cut out the repetitive information.

The US government, angered by the showing of the first videotape, applied direct pressure to the Qatar government. Certain American newspapers clearly asked for the bombing of the bureau in Kabul. This intimidation was strongly condemned by the international press and the organizations defending the freedom of expression.

Many questions are being asked on the bombing of the bureau in Kabul by the Americans a few hours after the fall of Kabul into the hands of the Northern Alliance. Al-Jazeera confirms that the office is well known by the Americans and it is difficult to believe that a mere error was committed.

Al-Jazeera has come as a surprise for many, for its journalists are advocating principles that are considered foreign with respect to their countries of origin, namely freedom of speech, liberty and objectivity. Not well endorsed by many Arab countries as well as the American government, Al-Jazeera receives ever-increasing support from both the Arab public and the international media/public.

**Bin Laden's signature from a fax to Al-Jazeera, 24 September 2001.**

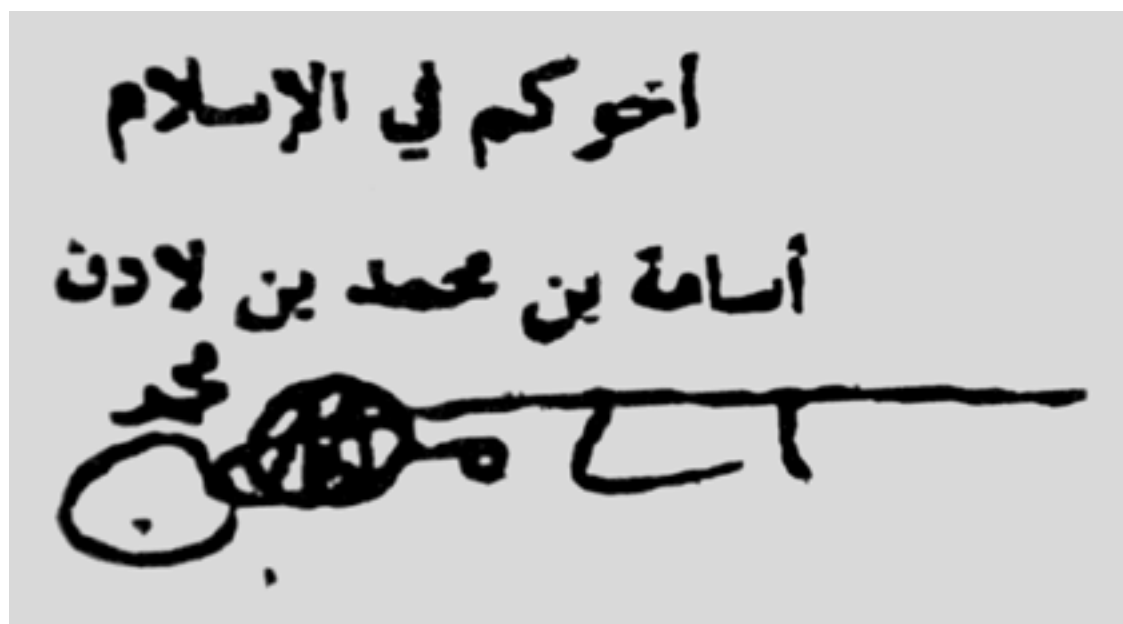


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