

# EXCERPTS:      Media Coverage about Al Jazeera English

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## **The Financial Times**

### **Al-Jazeera becomes the face of the frontline**

...With Israel banning foreign journalists from entering Gaza, al-Jazeera, the Qatari state-owned channel, has laid claim to being the only international broadcast house inside the strip.

It has a team working for its Arab language network, which made its name with its reporting from conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

For the English language service, launched after many delays in 2006, the war has been covered by Mr Mohyeldin, a 29-year-old American of Egyptian and Palestinian descent, and Sherine Tadros, a 28-year-old Briton of Egyptian descent.

And the crisis could mark a seminal point in al-Jazeera English's fortunes – just as the first Gulf war put CNN on the map. Last year the channel was struggling after a number of high profile defections.

Tony Burman, a former editor-in-chief at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, was brought in to turn things round. He admits it was a “rocky ship” but says morale at the station is now soaring.

“I think one of the great morale challenges for al-Jazeera English has been a fear that a lot of its hard work is not being seen by enough people,” he says. “I think that has turned around, I think people realise they are at the centre of a very important story.”

## **Associated Press**

### **Al-Jazeera drew US viewers on Web during Gaza war**

DOHA, Qatar (AP) — American viewership of Al-Jazeera English rose dramatically during the Israel-Hamas war, partly because the channel had what CNN and other international networks didn't have: reporters inside Gaza.

But the viewers weren't watching it on television, where the Arab network's English-language station has almost no U.S. presence.

Instead, the station streamed video of Israel's offensive against Hamas on the Internet and took advantage of emerging online media such as the microblogging Web site Twitter to provide real-time updates.

During the 22-day conflict that ended last weekend, the station and its Arabic language sister, as they often do, aired far more graphic pictures than U.S. networks of dead and injured Palestinian children and women.

The images, viewed widely across the Mideast, generated enormous sympathy for Gazans in the Muslim world.

"Gaza ... was a breakthrough opportunity to make an impact with people who are less aware of Al-Jazeera than we'd like," said Tony Burman, managing director of the English-language channel in Qatar.

"There is an alternative perspective our channel provides, and Gaza was a good example," Burman said.

Al-Jazeera had another draw: Its reporters were inside Gaza while international networks such as CNN were barred by Israel from sending reporters in throughout the entire war. Israeli TV focused mostly on Israeli casualty reports and Hamas rocket barrages.

"Having reporters in Gaza — which others did not have — that's what made Al-Jazeera stand out and that's important on the Internet," said Jeff Jarvis, who teaches journalism at the City University of New York and writes about media on his Buzzmachine.com blog.

Overall, the station's Web video stream saw a 600 percent jump in worldwide viewership during the Gaza offensive — and about 60 percent of those hits came from the United States, according to the station's internal numbers.

Outside figures also point to big gains in U.S. online interest, suggesting the war gave the Arab station its first significant chance to break into the American market.

...The Internet has made it possible for the network to reach American viewers despite the limitations of its cable television broadcasts.

The English channel has a different staff and separate budget from the Arabic network. Its executives say they have no political agenda in coverage of the Mideast.

Politics aside, there is little question that the Gaza war gave the station a viewership boost — similar to what CNN got on cable in the 1991 Gulf War.

From its start, Al-Jazeera English has offered grainy, low-resolution access to the same broadcasts shown on cable television through its Web site. Higher-quality transmissions were also available for a price. A few months before the Gaza offensive began, the network began the same broadcasts on a new Web-based platform known as Livestation, which allows users to watch high-quality broadcasts online live and for free.

Livestation said Al-Jazeera English footage viewed on its site jumped to 17 million minutes worldwide over a two week period during the Gaza conflict, up from 3 million minutes in a similar time period before the conflict began.

## The Economist

### **Despite devoting unparalleled attention to the media, Israel is losing the propaganda war**

... The English-language sister channel of al-Jazeera, with two reporters in Gaza, has flourished in the absence of Western competitors, such as CNN. Its coverage has been graphic but sombre in tone. This contrasts with the hyperbole on many Arabic-language networks, where charges of Israeli "genocide", mixed with unsubstantiated reports of Hamas's military successes, have been frequent, accompanied by dramatic music and filler material looping pictures of dead children

## U.S. News & World Report/ Jordan Times

### **One of Gaza War's Big Winners: Al Jazeera**

The Gaza war, now in the early days of a shaky cease-fire, continues to dominate Arab politics. Liberal columnist Daoud Kuttab regards its "Winners and Losers," naming one of the former as Al Jazeera, the Arab satellite TV news network that established its presence in the Gaza war just as CNN made its name in the 1991 Gulf War. He writes in **The Jordan Times**:

"With non-Arab Western journalists denied entry into Gaza, the only English language media outlet which had the field to itself, succeeded in not only filling the gap but doing so with professionalism and balance... Al Jazeera International kept its poise and won the respect of many around the world."

## The New York Times/ International Herald Tribune

### **Al Jazeera provides an inside look at Gaza conflict**

... In a conflict where the Western news media have been largely prevented from reporting from Gaza because of restrictions imposed by the Israeli military, Al Jazeera has had a distinct advantage. It was already there. ... Al Jazeera describes itself on the air as "the only international broadcaster with a presence there."...Recognizing that its material from Gaza will have influence in the United States only if it is highly accessible online, Al Jazeera has aggressively experimented with using the Internet to distribute its reports... Al Jazeera said that since the war started, the number of people watching its broadcasts via the Livestation service has increased by over 500 percent, and the number of videos viewed on the YouTube channel has increased by more than 150 percent.

## The Guardian

### **Al Jazeera's crucial reporting role in Gaza**

**By Roy Greenslade**

It is clear from Oliver Luft's article in the Media Guardian that journalists across the world are furious at being denied access to a theatre of war (and, yes, it is a war).

However, we should not overlook the work of Al Jazeera English, exemplified by its TV broadcasts and the material available on its website. For many of us trying to follow what's happening, it is an essential news outlet.

It has two reporters on the ground - Ayman Mohyeldin, a 29 year-old American of Egyptian and Palestinian descent and Sherine Tadros, 28, who holds joint British and Egyptian citizenship.

There is also one staff cameraman. They have been in Gaza since last year, shortly before the border was closed.

I understand that their sterling work for Al Jazeera is now being watched in 130m households and the number is growing by the day as more and more people switch to the broadcaster to find out what is really happening in Gaza.

So, in many ways, this conflict means as much to Al Jazeera's profile as the first gulf war meant to CNN. In that sense, it could be seen as a seminal point in the channel's history. However, it has still not overcome the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans cannot see its TV output... I often tune into Al Jazeera English and respect what those Gaza reporters are doing, and how they are going about their work.

Anyway, even Americans cannot be denied the website. No wonder the channel has begun an ad campaign to publicise its site in the US, the country that is most in need of receiving more balanced reportage on the conflict.

## **Arab Media and Society/ Columbia Journalism Review**

### **Gaza: Of media wars and borderless journalism**

By Lawrence Pintak

The contrast between U.S. television and Al Jazeera English, the Western-managed counterpart to the Arabic channel the Bush administration loved to hate, could not be starker. After two years of missteps, Al Jazeera English has hit its stride. And until shortly before the January 19 ceasefire, it was the only channel with international reporters on the ground inside Gaza. And since late December, it has been all Gaza, all the time. AJE essentially turned its entire broadcast day over to coverage of the conflict.

... With its mix of Arab and Western correspondents, news executives from Canadian, British and Arab networks, and access to the regional infrastructure and expertise of Al Jazeera Arabic, AJE is a channel born to cover this conflict.

Two correspondents from AJE were in Gaza when Israel sealed the border in mid-December: Ayman Mohyeldin, an American who started his career as a producer for NBC and CNN, and Sherine Tadros, a British-Egyptian former staffer at Al Arabiya who was sent to Gaza as a producer but moved on camera when the fighting began. Their reporting has been nothing short of riveting.

But it is the comprehensive nature of the coverage, the seamless integration of news and programming, which has resulted in a body of work that not only brings viewers into the heart of the conflict, but sets the war in its political, geographic and historical context.

Standouts include Sami Zeidan's take-no-prisoners interviews with IDF spokespeople, Kamal Santa Maria's touching conversation with the secretary general of the Swedish Red Cross on the human toll, and "Gaza: The Road to War," a special that took viewers back sixty years.

Whether in the field or in the studio, AJE's coverage has been cool and collected, largely free of the emotion that is often in evidence on its sister Arabic-language network; and the word "martyr," used by Al Jazeera Arabic and many other Arab news organizations to describe Palestinian dead, has not crossed the lips of AJE's staffers.

The overarching title of AJE's coverage, "War On Gaza," telegraphed the channel's perspective – "on" not "in" was a conscious choice. The reporting reflected a distinct attitude; an implicit sense of identification with the Palestinian victims – the civilians, not the Hamas fighters – evident, for example, in a crawl at the bottom of the screen listing the names and ages of some of the more than 300 Palestinian children killed.

But it is an engaged journalism borne of empathy that, to this viewer's mind, stopped short of betraying an overt bias against Israel – much to the disappointment of some Arabs, such as a guest columnist in Qatar's *Ash Sharq* newspaper, who charged that "the English-language channel either consciously or unconsciously is moving within the orbit of the Israeli approach."

AJE's correspondents inside Israel – veterans of the BBC, ITN and CNN – have been aggressive in their approach, as in reporter James Bays' questioning of Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, but they have also not shied away from reporting on the impact of Hamas missiles on Israeli citizens.

The American networks, by contrast, have largely abandoned the Middle East. A few weeks before the Gaza crisis broke CBS News fired most of the staff of its Israel bureau. ABC recently cut a deal to use the BBC's reporting from Baghdad so it can strip down its own operation. The evening newscasts of ABC, CBS and NBC together gave just 434 minutes of airtime to Iraq in 2008, according to the Tyndall Report, and there were days in the first two weeks of the Gaza war when the networks did not bother to air a piece on the conflict.

They are, essentially, ceding reporting of the region (and much of the world) to others. Ironically, in the long run, given the U.S. networks' track record in recent years, that may be a good thing – if these alternatives become more available to the average American. For the moment, BBC America is seen on some cable systems, CNN International cannot be viewed inside the U.S., and, with a few localized exceptions, Al Jazeera English is only available online via Livestation and YouTube.

The kind of borderless journalism these channels increasingly offer creates the potential to replace the myopic coverage that has fueled misunderstanding since 9/11, staking out space in the uncharted turf between the rival bloodshot lenses of the domestic U.S. and Arab networks.

It is a place where worldviews are not quite so fixed, where audiences are exposed to more than just their own preconceived notions, and where a new definition of balance just might be found.

**Lawrence Pintak** is publisher/co-editor of Arab Media & Society and director of the Kamal Adham Center for Journalism Training and Research at The American University in Cairo.

## **The Los Angeles Times**

### **GAZA STRIP: In praise of Al Jazeera**

Say what you will about Al Jazeera, but the landmark Arab satellite news channel has absolutely led the pack in conveying the realities of the [ongoing Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip](#).

In both its original Arabic and fledgling English-language versions, Jazeera has blanketed the story, bringing real-time images that it's likely most American viewers will never see....The channel doesn't shield its viewers from the horrors of war.

An old friend of mine from Boston arrived in Jerusalem for a visit on Friday. The first time she saw Jazeera English's footage of casualties in a Gaza City hospital, she was shocked. She simply never had seen such graphic images.

## **Kansas City Star**

### **A different take on the Gaza invasion**

Everybody is on the Gaza situation. Even MSNBC has interrupted its weekend of rerun filler to cover it. But if you'd like a decidedly non-American-centric take, Al Jazeera English appears to have reporters all over the place. And the Doha correspondent just had one of those exchanges with a spokesman for the Israeli PM that you just don't see on American TV. And if you do, it's usually followed by someone throwing a temper tantrum - remember the McCain campaign blackballing Larry King, the softest of all softballs, after Campbell Brown beat up a McCain flack earlier in the day? Those Israelis put their suits on with five-inch nails -- they're tough. Watch as the spokesflack gives as good as he gets. And they'll get right back on AJE and do it again in a couple of hours, if not sooner. And beam it into Israel, where AJE has (last I heard) replaced BBC World on the largest Israeli cable systems....Al Jazeera is possibly the most courageous television station in the world, and what is the truth, unadulterated truth, every little bit of it. I myself cannot bear to watch it nowadays as the images from Gaza are just too terrible to bear, but the reality is still the reality.

## **Columbia Journalism Review**

### **(Not) Getting Into Gaza**

Dion Nissenbaum, Jerusalem bureau chief for McClatchy Newspapers, reports that “the Israeli military has once again barred the first small group of international reporters from getting into Gaza” even as “more and more journalists continue to arrive every day in hopes of” doing just that. “For the moment,” Nissenbaum writes, “the only comprehensive coverage coming out of Gaza is from Al Jazeera English, the young channel still not available on US satellite channels.”

Nissenbaum calls those reports graphic and stark portrayals of the situation that rarely make it on sanitized US news programs...[reports that]can at-times be hyperbolic, but US viewers should be used to that kind of thing from watching Fox News.

Especially at a time when the international media is unable to provide a view of the situation, Al Jazeera’s coverage is all-the-more valuable.

## Le Monde, Paris

### **Ayman Mohyeldin, 29, War Correspondent in Gaza**

The first contact by telephone is a terse one. *"I have now the chance to take a shower for the first time in ten days. Call me back in 15 minutes"*. The man who makes this confession is neither a miner nor a sailor on a long journey. He is Ayman Mohyeldin, 29, Gaza's correspondent of Al-Jazeera International (AJE), the English-speaking cousin of the famous Qatari news channel, and the only non Arabic-speaking channel working from the coastal Palestinian strip.

For more than two weeks, and along with his British colleague Sherine Tadros, Ayman, a US citizen, has been live covering the developments of the Israeli offensive. Contrary to their foreign colleagues who were confined to stay on Gaza's borders because Israel refuses to allow them in, these two AJE journalists do not only hear the deafening noise of the shelling, but they also listen to the sufferings of those who are targeted.

## Canada: Halifax Chronicle Herald

### **Why can't Canadians watch Al Jazeera?**

We live in a country where we can watch just about anything on our televisions. Or so it may seem. Star Choice, for example, offers such a panoply of programming that it's hard to know what to watch. Sports? Comedy? Weather? Home makeovers? Movies? News? But which news? We can choose from all the major American, Canadian and European networks. Yet there's one network conspicuously absent from Canadian cable and satellite television menus. That's Al Jazeera, the Qatari broadcaster, winner of dozens of international news and current affair awards.

Canadian Tony Burman, head of Al Jazeera's English network and former CBC editor-in-chief, says that Al Jazeera English is seen in 130 million households in 105 countries. It boasts 70 bureaus, more than CNN and BBC. It employs journalists from 45 countries. Its key editors are veterans of the BBC, ABC Australia, CNN and CBC, among others. Yet it's not available in Canada.

... A young Canadian journalist who discovered Al Jazeera while in West Africa raves about its "fair and in-depth reporting" that doesn't shy away from controversy. It was Al Jazeera that turned the ex-Muslim, anti-Muslim spokesperson Wafa Sultan into a worldwide phenomenon.

Al Jazeera appeases no one and draws criticism in the Arab world as much as it does anywhere else. Good journalism does that, annoying those who don't appreciate open debate and discussion. Then why is Canada, which cherishes those democratic principles, one of the few countries where Al Jazeera is not

available?... So far, no cable or satellite operators have applied to the CRTC to bring Al Jazeera English – launched in 2006 – to Canada. But it's worth a public campaign to lobby them to do so, and then to pressure the CRTC to fix this gaping hole in our media choices when it comes to news.

## **The Huffington Post**

### **Al Jazeera English Beats Israel's Ban on Reporters in Gaza with Exclusive Coverage**

Some may call it propaganda but I call it hardcore reporting. If you are not watching Al Jazeera English's coverage of the War on Gaza, you are missing much, if not, most of the story.

Israel has invaded Gaza, divided it, and banned foreign journalists from entering -- but Al Jazeera English was inside before the war began, and its reporting is as inexorable, though more precise, than Israel's "surgical attacks." When Israel closed the border crossing into Gaza they successfully prevented most journalists and reporters from entering the strip.

But unlike Western media companies who generally have their correspondents based in Jerusalem, Al Jazeera's Ayman Mohyeldin and Sherine Tadros were already in Gaza before Israel's invasion, leaving them with the huge responsibility of providing virtually exclusive reporting -- and they've delivered.

I could ramble on about their thorough and thought-provoking reporting of this controversial story or I could send you Livestation where you can quickly download a program for free that will allow you to watch Al Jazeera English in high quality (as well as dozens of other international news channels) legally.

If I flip the channel up one I'm watching CNN International -- a channel I was addicted to while growing up and that first introduced me to the wonders and worries of the world. But despite CNN's well-earned and undeniable impressive reputation and all of its bells and whistles, it has not matched Al Jazeera's in-depth coverage this time around.

....As the recent global economic crisis and this latest crisis in Gaza show, our world is large but it is getting smaller. We are more interconnected than we have ever been and Al Jazeera English offers a comprehensive and ground-breaking global perspective, emphasizing news from the developing world and providing a context for it.

Sadly, major cable providers still refuse to carry Al Jazeera English, but perhaps, if Americans watch their coverage of this war, they will realize that while it is not an NBC comedy show, it is "Must See TV."

## **Haaretz, Israel**

### **My hero of the Gaza war**

My war hero likes to eat at Acre's famed Uri Burri restaurant. He thinks it's the best fish restaurant in the world, and told me as much yesterday from the porch of the central Gaza City office building from which he has broadcast every day for the past two weeks, noon and night, almost without rest.

My war hero is Ayman Mohyeldin, the young correspondent for Al Jazeera English and the only foreign (network) broadcasting during these awful days in a Gaza Strip closed off to the media. Al Jazeera English is not what you might think. It offers balanced, professional reporting from correspondents both in Sderot and Gaza. And Mohyeldin is the cherry on top of this journalistic cream. I wouldn't have needed him or his broadcasts if not for the Israeli stations' blackout of the fighting. Since discovering this wunderkind from America (his mother is from the West Bank city of Tul Karm and his father from Egypt), I have stopped frantically changing TV stations.

...At age 29, he has already seen one war, in Iraq, but he says this war is more intense. He is frustrated that his broadcasts are carried virtually everywhere in the world except the United States, his own country, the place he thinks it is most important that these images from Gaza be seen.

"At the end of the day, if there is one country that can have influence, it's the United States. It's frustrating to know you're not reaching the viewers you would like to," he told me this week from the roof. On Friday he finally came down, for safety's sake, after the Israel Defense Forces bombed a neighboring media center.

## **The National, Abu Dhabi**

### **Door opens for Al Jazeera**

In the final days before the US presidential election in November, Tony Burman, the managing director of Al Jazeera English, was feeling optimistic.

Earlier in the year, the former news head of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had been confronted by turmoil and low morale when he took the helm of the Doha-based broadcaster.

But as the now US president, Barack Obama, became increasingly likely to win, Mr Burman felt that it was also increasingly likely that an Obama-led nation would be more open to international voices such as Al Jazeera.

At the time, Mr Burman suggested that Mr Obama's historic election might just be the tipping point that

would allow Al Jazeera English to break through the political and commercial barriers that had blocked it from the lucrative US cable market.

Little did he know that by the time Mr Obama climbed on to the podium to be sworn in as the 44th president, the station would indeed have experienced a tipping point – although it turned out to have taken place on the other side of the world.

When Israeli missile attacks on Gaza began on Dec 27, Al Jazeera English was the only English-language news organisation with a reporting team in the Palestinian territory. An Israeli ban on foreign journalists entering Gaza kept it that way for most of the 22-day conflict, forcing major international broadcasters such as CNN to resort to reporting remotely or running footage from Al Jazeera.

The result was a surge in US viewers online that has made Mr Burman's talk about getting into the US market sound more than a fancy speech about hope.

"The response to our Gaza coverage by Americans is just a reminder that there is a hunger in the US for a better understanding of the world," Mr Burman says. "Over the next six months, both in Canada and the US, we are very hopeful that there will be a breakthrough."

The station claims that its video web stream saw a six-fold jump in viewership during the fighting, about 60 per cent of which came from within the US.

... This surge in viewership was hardly accidental. It represents the coming together of two strategies, one editorial and the other technological, that set Al Jazeera apart from its competitors.

On the editorial side, the channel's decision to have a team in Gaza permanently is part of a broader mission to cover what some at the station have called the "south", or underreported part of the world.

"We have always regarded what was going on in Gaza as important, and for that reason, we've always staffed it," Mr Burman says.

Many western news organisations were hesitant to send staff to Gaza after the BBC's Gaza reporter was captured and held for nearly four months by militants in 2007, he says. "The Alan Johnston kidnapping chastened many organisations, but I guess my response is that these kinds of risks exist in all areas of the world, and it's up to news organisations to be tenacious."

On the technical side, the conflict coincided with Al Jazeera introducing several innovative online initiatives, including a citizen journalism portal that encouraged viewers to submit photos and eyewitness accounts.

As soon as the conflict broke out, the channel increased online efforts, creating a page on the microblogging site Twitter for Gaza updates and experimenting with interactive maps.

"This was accelerated because of the war," Mr Burman says. "We realised early on that our unique position in the coverage of Gaza was really something that required a full-court press in the way that we got our message out to people," he said. "Our new media department went into overdrive."

So did its marketing department. The channel ran several ads in The New York Times and Washington

Post pointing readers to its website, which was already gaining a reputation as the best source of Gaza reporting. In another innovative move, the channel released its footage of Gaza under an attribution licence that allowed others to use it for no charge.

“This is the 21st century,” Mr Burman says. “We felt that it is important for us to not be overly possessive of the material.”

This material largely has been well received throughout both the Arab and western worlds, with the Guardian, the British newspaper, describing Al Jazeera English as an “essential news outlet” and the Economist praising its coverage as “graphic but sombre”, in contrast to the “hyperbole on many Arabic-language networks”.

...Although the Al Jazeera English coverage is more graphic than the reporting normally shown on most western channels, its efforts to get both sides of the story and the straightforward reporting style of Ayman Mohyeldin, a reporter educated in the US, have helped begin to break down some of the prejudices against Al Jazeera that had built up during the era of the former US president, George W Bush, media watchers say.

This is happening just as many western channels are cutting back their Middle-Eastern operations. Just before the Gaza conflict started...There were days in the first two weeks of the Gaza conflict when the networks did not cover the fighting, according to Lawrence Pintak, the director of the Kamal Adham Center for Journalism Training and Research at The American University in Cairo. “They are, essentially, ceding reporting of the region [and much of the world] to others,” he wrote in the Columbia Journalism Review.

As a North American journalist, Mr Burman finds these developments dismaying but says they provide an opportunity for Al Jazeera English. “It is ironic that arguably the most powerful country in the world is in many ways the most uninformed about anything beyond its own borders,” he says.

“Our hope is to change that.”

## **New American Media**

### **Al Jazeera Breaks the Israeli Media Blockade**

DAMASCUS, Syria -- Throughout the 11 days of Israel's pummeling of Gaza, live coverage of the war hasn't made it into most American living rooms.

That's because Israel, America's staunch ally, isn't allowing journalists to enter Gaza while Al Jazeera, called anti-American and pro-terrorist by many in Washington, is the only network broadcasting live images from Gaza to the world.

...But Al Jazeera, the Qatari network that has previously undergone attacks and had its reporters

arrested by the U.S. military, remains typically defiant. While other networks are increasingly severed from Gaza as phone lines are cut and 75 percent of the territory is without electricity, Al Jazeera is bringing its approximately 140 million English- and Arabic-speaking viewers live images of bombings, tanks rolling through Gaza's farmland, and interviews with civilians and aid workers inside Gaza city.

Like all of the networks, Al Jazeera gives constant hard-hitting interviews with politicians and analysts from Israel, the West Bank, and the rest of the Arab world. But while others can only balance pundits with more pundits, Al Jazeera has been taking the viewer to the scene to weigh the words of politicians against the reality on the ground.

Take Israel's claim that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza. After showing an Israeli politician writing off the assertion of the existence of a humanitarian disaster, Al Jazeera cut to the Al Shifa hospital, the largest in all of Gaza. There, we saw that there were not enough medical supplies and civilians lying on bloody hospital beds told us that their lives were not only being crippled by bombs falling on their houses, but by the extreme lack of water and food for the people cowering inside them.

.... Meanwhile, the world's only live coverage of the tragedy is kept away from American eyes. While Al Jazeera English competes with CNN and BBC as one of the largest networks in the world, no major American cable provider has been willing to carry the channel since it launched in 2006. Some say cable providers are squeamish about working with a channel popularly perceived in the United States as giving airtime to terrorists.

But Al Jazeera is finding its way around the problem. Today, Americans hungry for inside coverage of Gaza can download Livestation, a free program that will let viewers watch Al Jazeera English among other international networks. Defiant as always, Al Jazeera might break through another media blackout, and into American homes.

## How I learned to love Al-Jazeera

The Arab TV network is controversial for showing Osama bin Laden's videos, but it provides a real opportunity to help people understand each other

### **Ofir Gendelman (Diplomat, Israeli Embassy, Ottawa)**

Ottawa Citizen Special

*Saturday, April 21, 2007*

It is common to denounce Al-Jazeera, the wildly popular Qatari TV station, as a venue for anti-Israel and anti-American propaganda, and as the favourite channel of Osama bin Laden. As an Israeli, however, I prefer to think of Al-Jazeera (along with other emerging Arabic language TV channels) as a potential friend.

Until Al-Jazeera appeared in 1996, TV stations throughout the Arab world served mainly as the mouthpieces of their respective regimes. The newscasts dutifully reported on the daily activities of the ruling king or dictator -- whom he met, where he visited, how many people came from far and wide to greet him. It was deadly dull.

Then along came Al-Jazeera, which for the first time ever allowed criticism of these same Arab regimes (except, of course, the Qatari ruling family, one of whose members is the founder of the channel). Arab viewers were immediately captivated and ratings soared. So did profits, prompting other Arabic media to copy the new genre. The Arab media scene was changed forever.

Al-Jazeera was the first Arab channel to host Israelis, officials and pundits alike, a daring novelty that would normally be viewed as treason to the Arab Cause against the Jewish state. Again, ratings went through the roof, and the lesson was clear: Book an Israeli guest and Arab audiences will tune in. Other Arabic stations did just that, and



CREDIT: Caren Firouz, Reuters

The entrance to the Al-Jazeera studios is seen through a cactus garden in Doha, Qatar. The channel has become an unexpected means to build respect between Israelis and Arabs.

suddenly the masses were being introduced to flesh-and-blood Israelis in their own living rooms.

The Israeli government seized the opportunity. Since 2001, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has used a special team to serve as Israel's face on the Arab TV screens. These individuals, all of them experts in Arabic culture and language, Islamic history and Middle Eastern politics, were prepped by the top TV trainers in Israel and the United States, in order to help them better pitch the Israeli message to their designated audience.

Think about it: For generations, Arabs have been told by their leaders what to think about Jews and Israelis, but now Israeli spokespeople are able to speak directly to the Arab street, in its own language and over the heads of its illiberal governments. Arabs for the first time could see that Israelis don't have horns and tails, that we are willing to talk about peace and co-existence, that we respect and understand Arab history and culture. Even those channels that were reluctant at first to host Israelis, for fear of "fraternizing with the enemy," could see that interviewing Israelis in Arabic brought ratings, attention and influence.

As the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' first spokesperson to the Arab media outlets, I witnessed how the attitude toward Israel changed over time. At first, every time I was interviewed on the evening news of Al-Jazeera and its competitors, the anchors treated me rudely.

Although Arab culture is famous for its hospitality and manners, no one said "Good evening" or a simple "Hello, thanks for being with us." At the end of these interviews the anchors would cut me off and finish with a statement such as: "Surely, the Palestinian struggle will go on."

Slowly but surely, they got used to me and the discourse became warm. A friend of mine was killed in a terrorist bombing at the Hebrew University campus in Jerusalem, and 15 minutes after hearing the news I received a call from an Arab producer. I went on the show to give the official Israeli response to the attack but, grief-stricken, I also told the anchor that my best friend had died in the attack. Through my earpiece I heard my interviewer say, "May Allah's mercy be upon him. I'm sorry for your loss."

To me, that was a breakthrough. We were talking to each other as people to people.

To supplement this direct engagement with ordinary Arab citizens, the Israeli foreign ministry created an Arabic website, [altawasul.net](http://altawasul.net) (altawasul means "making a connection"), featuring information not just about Israel's government and policies, but also a window into the "Israel behind the news."

When Arabs think of Israelis, they often think of soldiers, but we are a nation of poets, peaceniks, scientists, philosophers, even beach bums. The website is so popular now that writers from Arab countries which do not have diplomatic relations with Israel use

it as a platform to publish their articles and to speak directly to the Israeli and Arab publics alike, calling for peace.

This idea of talking to the Arab world in its own language, using its own terminology, should be adopted by other democratic countries, especially those who feel the war on terror is at least in part a war over ideas.

It's astonishing to me the U.S. State Department has just one Arabic speaking diplomat, representing the entire Bush administration on highly important matters such as the war in Iraq and the situation in the Middle East.

The application to bring Al-Jazeera to Canadian television was controversial, but Canada, Britain and other G-8 members could learn a lot from the Israeli experience. After all, they enjoy a huge advantage of having diplomatic relations with all the Arab countries, something Israel sadly does not have.

Everyone likes to talk about winning the "hearts and minds" of Arabs, but that's impossible to do if you don't know their culture and background, and if you don't start talking to them in their own language.

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<http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/opinion/story.html?id=e1a46a01-05d6-4c61-b762-c2b86f9224ac&p=1>

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