

Arab Arguments: Talk Shows
and the New Arab Public Sphere

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Since Al Jazeera exploded on the Arab scene in the late 1990s, its talk shows have ushered in a culture of contentious public debate, a culture that has fundamentally shattered unitary Arab nationalist discourse.¹ They shattered decades of tight Arab state control over the public agenda that imposed a stifling silence on real political debate. Al Jazeera's talk shows helped to bring into being a new Arab public oriented toward contentious public argument about issues of interest to a shared Arab identity. This new public already has a deeply ingrained expectation of public disagreement and dissent that was almost unthinkable only a short time ago. Do Arab talk shows constitute a new Arab public sphere?

Many observers have raised serious concerns about the political effects of these talk shows. Some fear that it is driving a culture of talk rather than a culture of action, transforming Arabs into a "media phenomenon."² On the brink of the American invasion of Iraq, Al Jazeera presenter Faisal al-Qassem lamented, "why does nothing remain in the Arab arena except for some croaking media personalities? Why does a loud television clamor suffice as an alternative to effective action?"³ Others despair at the perceived low quality of discussion that inclines to "the superficial and the sensational . . . [lacking] focused dialogue . . . and dominated by accusations and the settling of scores."⁴ For Abdallah Schleifer, "all too often these talk shows degenerated into unproductive shouting matches in which abuse replaced dialogue and analysis . . . these talk shows are too often a vehicle for the collective venting of emotion rather than an exercise in critical

thinking.⁵ Others worry that the artificial staging of the debates leads to an exacerbation of differences and the elision of the vital center, degrading the political culture by driving argument to the extremes.⁶ For Jon Alterman, “much of the debate in Arab media is a false debate, either between two ludicrous extremes, or between a guest espousing a ‘proper’ view and his heretical opponent. . . . Arab debates often resemble nothing so much as professional wrestling, where the outcome is clear before the adversaries even step into the ring.”⁷

Arab talk shows have therefore generated considerable controversy. But due to the absence of serious research on either the content of the talk shows or on their impact, such arguments remain largely anecdotal and speculative.⁸ Is Al Jazeera driving sectarian conflict in Iraq through its choice of guests on its talk shows? Is it fomenting anti-Americanism by constructing its talk shows in ways that ensure America cannot win? This chapter offers some empirical evidence to begin evaluating these arguments, first by offering an overview of the content of Al Jazeera’s talk shows over a five-year period and then by looking in detail at a single “dialogue moment,” the debates over a 2004 American reform initiative. I argue that much of the discussion of these talk shows has been slanted by an overemphasis on a particular type of talk show, exemplified by Faisal al-Qassem’s *The Opposite Direction*, and by a failure to recognize the difference between “mobilizational moments” and “dialogue moments” in Arab politics.

TALK SHOWS AND POLITICS

You are hurting America . . . stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America.

—Jon Stewart, to Tucker Carlson, host of CNN’s Crossfire.⁹

Talk shows have not generally been seen as a progressive political force. In his analysis of American daytime talk shows, Joshua Gamson noted the widespread concern about “the damage these shows do to democracy by posing as democratic public fora but gutting themselves of almost everything but ratings-driven exhibitions . . . [exposing] a liberal public sphere severely eroded and impoverished by its central driver, commercial television, where quick emotion displaces rational deliberation.”¹⁰ Echoes of such denunciations resound in the debates about Arab talk shows. But the Arab context is fundamentally different rather than representing a degeneration of a once rational or sophisticated public sphere, these talk shows filled a gaping void in the Arab political arena.¹¹ Prior to Al Jazeera’s emergence, an enforced silence

about contentious issues—combined with loud but unanimous demands on issues such as Palestine—produced an Arab public in which dissent and argument (rare novelty acts, at the time) were quickly silenced.

Al Jazeera attracted unprecedented mass audiences with its pioneering coverage of the Iraqi crisis in the late 1990s and the Palestinian-Israeli fighting beginning in 2000. While Al Jazeera has faced mounting competition, it remains the one station watched by virtually everyone, making its programs the “common knowledge” of Arab politics, which all Arabs can reasonably assume that others have seen and are prepared to discuss.¹² Rather than limit debate to approved areas, Al Jazeera’s programs delighted in shattering taboos and in provoking sharp debates. Broadcast live, these programs danced at the edge of chaos, tantalizing viewers with the possibility of transgression.

Some of its most sensational programs over the years have become iconic in discussions of the Arab media—the debate between Sadeq Jalal al-Azm and Yusuf al-Qaradawi over secularism; the time that the American academic Asaad Abu Khalil provoked a diplomatic crisis by mocking Jordan’s King Hussein; the time that Toujan Faisal drove a spluttering Islamic conservative to stomp off the set; the time that the American-based feminist Wafa Sultan needed an Egyptian Islamic conservative about Islam’s failures. This focus on exemplary moments can actually conceal what is most important about Al Jazeera’s programs: the way their relentless return to critiques of the Arab status quo cumulatively reshaped the entire Arab public agenda.

Al Jazeera’s prioritization of public argument is what transformed the satellite television form into a potentially revolutionary forum. The “public sphere” qualities of Al Jazeera resided in its live, unpredictable character, with public argument oriented toward an imagined audience conceptualized as incorporating all Arabs. Participation, through phone calls and faxes and internet voting created at least the illusion that this public was open to all members of this Arab identity, and that their Arab identity was made manifest through the act of expressing an opinion in public. These talk shows offered perhaps the first real opportunity for Arabs to argue freely about issues of the day before a vast audience of those who share an identity and concerns. In contrast to the demands for conformity in Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s pan-Arabism, Al Jazeera celebrated difference and argument within the bounds of a shared identity. Few participants in these programs disagree with the core shared commitments that define the new Arab public: questions of reform, Israel, Iraq, and of Arab identity in the face of American power. But within

those parameters, they disagree—often vehemently—about what should be done or about what conclusions to draw from events. Even on something as central to Arab identity as the Palestinian *Intifada*, it could air a debate on whether it was a waste of time.

Al Jazeera was not the first Arab TV station to offer talk shows. In the 1990s, Emad Al-Dib pioneered the call-in format with *Istifta Ala al-Hawa* on the pay-station Orbit, while various talk shows appeared and disappeared on other stations over the years. But most of these programs were crippled by the omnipresent red lines inhibiting free debate. Generally prerecorded to give censors a chance to approve their contents, the shows and their guests demonstrated expert knowledge of which issues to leave alone.

Few Arab television stations have dared copy the public sphere aspects of Al Jazeera's talk shows, even when they have imitated the forms. Al-Arabiya, for instance, for all its high-tech sheen has largely stuck to prerecorded programs, in explicit repudiation of Al Jazeera's commitment to live, uncensored and unscripted presentation of political argument. Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed, director of al-Arabiya, has frequently argued that Arab television should focus more on the objective, professional presentation of news than on opinion and argument. This can be seen as an attempt to purge the Arab media of precisely the qualities that made Al Jazeera into a public sphere. Such a trend can be seen even on Al Jazeera. *Behind the News*, the signature, nightly, prime-time program introduced during a revamp of Al Jazeera's programming in the summer of 2005, represents an important departure from the "public sphere" conception. Its topics are selected by the editorial team, not by the host; it lasts only half an hour, dramatically reducing the time for give and take and for the in-depth exploration of issues; its dialogue tends to flow through the host, with little give and take among the guests; and there are no phone callers or audience participation. In short, it is more controlled from the top down and less open to unscripted, revelatory moments.

THE ARAB CONVERSATION: WHAT DO THESE TALK SHOWS TALK ABOUT?

Talk shows can be seen both as a window into Arab political discussions and as framing those debates. While it is risky to infer public opinion from these debates, they provide a unique entrance into Arab political arguments—not just public opinion as measured in surveys, but also the dynamic and fluid processes of arguments through which those opinions take shape. Al Jazeera's talk shows shaped the Arab

political agenda, placing events within what I have called the "Al Jazeera narrative." Most of the guests came from civil society, political parties, or journalism, and many of the programs featured opportunities for viewers to call in or otherwise participate. Whether by choice or by necessity, Al Jazeera hosted far fewer Arab heads of state or cabinet members than was common for Arab television.

Looking at 1039 episodes of the five most prominent general-interest political talk shows reveals some important trends.¹³ First, the Arab debate on Al Jazeera focused almost exclusively on Arab or Islamic issues. Barely a handful dealt with issues outside the immediate purview of the Arab world—and even those would be discussed in the context of how they affected Arabs. This was neither accidental nor insignificant: Al Jazeera self-consciously constructed itself as an Arab forum focused on Arab issues.

Four broad issues dominated Al Jazeera's agenda: Palestine, Iraq, reform, and America. Over a five-year period, Palestine and reform each made up about 26 percent of all programs, while Iraq and the United States each made up about 22 percent, with interesting variations over time. Palestine dominated the agenda from 1998 through 2002, while Iraq drove out virtually all other issues in 2003. Reform was a constant issue of concern, rising at some points and declining at others but always present. Finally, the United States became an increasingly central concern over the years, in line with its manifestly increased presence in the region after 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, and the adoption of a democratization agenda. Indeed, table 6.1 undercounts the American presence, as the United States increasingly intruded on and shaped discussion of all issues.

Table 6.1 Al Jazeera Talk Show Topics [Number (percent of total)]

	Palestine	Iraq	Reform	America	Total
1999	33 (24)	13 (9)	51 (37)	14 (10)	138
2000	39 (27)	14 (10)	46 (32)	12 (8)	142
2001	56 (36)	14 (9)	42 (27)	37 (24)	157
2002	66 (39)	33 (19)	31 (18)	49 (29)	170
2003	31 (17)	104 (57)	42 (23)	66 (36)	184
2004	48 (19)	51 (21)	57 (23)	54 (22)	248
Total	273 (26)	229 (22)	269 (26)	232 (22)	1039

Note: "America" programs are those in which words such as "America," "United States," or some obvious referent appears in the *title*, as almost every program about Iraq could be considered "about America," this method undercounts American presence. "Reform" programs are those that deal with social, economic, intellectual, or domestic political issues.

These concerns were not treated as discrete issues, but rather cohered in a discernible Al Jazeera narrative, defined not by consensus on all points but on a shared basic storyline within which points of disagreement made sense. Iraq passed from an area of near consensus to one of deep contention. From Al Jazeera's launch to the fall of Baghdad, this public took the suffering of the Iraqi people under sanctions—and the perfidy of the United States and Arab rulers in enforcing those sanctions—as a key marker of the shared narrative. After the war, however, this public was stunned to discover considerable hostility among Iraqis who believed that they had given support to Saddam—a dissonance that triggered a fascinating and important debate.¹⁴ It is telling that Al Jazeera responded to the fall of Baghdad by shelving its regular talk shows for six weeks in favor of *Mimbar al-Jazeera*, a live call-in show that allowed ordinary Arabs to argue about the bewildering new world with relatively little editorial control or oversight.

In 1999 and 2000, Al Jazeera hosted—in addition to regular discussions of elections or significant political events—frequent discussions of big questions such as the impact of generational change on Arab hopes for democracy (March 5, 1999), democracy in the Arab world (March 29, 1999), the Arab economic situation (May 12, 1999), the use of states of emergency (August 31, 1999), human rights (October 5, 1999, May 2, 2000), how to unleash freedom of thought (November 8, 1999), unemployment (December 8, 1999), honor crimes (February 22, 2000), youth problems (May 17, 2000), the new Arab wealthy (June 27, 2000), and women's rights (July 19, 2000).

After the outbreak of the Palestinian *al-Aqsa Intifada* in September 2000, Al Jazeera greatly increased its focus on Palestinian issues, with those topics taking up 36 percent of all shows in 2001 and 39 percent in 2002. Still, Al Jazeera continued to air programs on issues such as secularist-Islamist conflicts over freedom of expression (December 11, 2000), civil society (April 10, 2001), obstacles to investment (May 2, 2001), freedom of expression in the Arab media (June 30, 2001), Islamism and democracy (July 28, 2001), and “security mentalities” in the Arab world (August 25, 2001).

September 11 dominated the agenda for months afterward, leading to a sharp increase in attention to the United States, Islam, and the war on terror. As early as November, programs were beginning to speculate about an American war on Iraq (November 28, 2001). Reform discussions also continued, particularly with an eye toward the effects of the war on terror on political freedoms: the future of human rights (December 25, 2001), the lost role of Arab parliaments (January 8, 2002), the crisis of Arab culture (January 30, 2002), a

mocking look at 99.99 percent electoral victories (June 11, 2002), and considerable discussion of the 2002 Arab Human Development Report (August 13, 2002; August 7, 2002). But such reform talk was increasingly lost within angry arguments about Israel (especially toward the spring, when Israel reoccupied the West Bank), sullen defensiveness about external pressures, loud fury at incompetent and unresponsive regimes, and a growing, hostile focus on the United States—particularly after President Bush's “Axis of Evil” speech in early 2002 and the growing talk of war with Iraq.

Iraq absolutely dominated the first half of 2003, driving out almost all other issues. But in the second half of 2003, Al Jazeera returned to its reform agenda, with greater focus on the shortcomings of Arab regimes and more sustained debates about a possible American role in promoting reform. The tone of many of these programs about reform was defensive: responding to American pressure rather than working through Arab issues on their own terms. As early as May 2003, programs considered the possibilities of reform after the Iraq earthquake (HM May 17, 2003), with defensiveness and anti-American skepticism doing battle with desperate frustration and hopes for some kind of a change. By early 2004, reform debates were in full swing, even as Iraq continued to shape much of the discursive arena. Darfur emerged as a surprisingly central issue over the course of 2004, with at least eight programs devoted to Sudan in this period.

AGAINST FAISAL-CENTRISM

Most discussion of Arab talk shows has focused on one very distinctive and important model: *The Opposite Direction*, hosted by Faisal al-Qassem. *The Opposite Direction* typically pitted two diametrically opposed individuals against one another, with a provocatively worded question and with Qassem baiting them and spurring them on into argumentative frenzy. *The Opposite Direction* was the most popular and controversial Al Jazeera program, but there was no single Al Jazeera style. Recognizing this diversity is important, because overreliance on this one format has colored much of the research on Arab talk shows, highlighting their polarizing and sensationalizing qualities. For instance, Mohamed Ayish studied ten episodes of *The Opposite Direction* to show how each tended to follow a consistent rhythm and flow, pushing toward a predictable outcome.¹⁵ Mohamed al-Nawawy and Adel Iskander's chapter on Al Jazeera's talk shows, titled “Boxing Rings,” primarily draws its examples from Qassem's program.¹⁶ Mamoun Fandy's negative portrayal of Al Jazeera's talk shows as a

reinvention of Nasser's Voice of the Arabs was limited to two episodes of *The Opposite Direction*.¹⁷ For that matter, a significant portion of the formal complaints received by Al Jazeera or the Qatari government pertained to Qassem's program.¹⁸

But realizing that this "Faisal-centric" view of the talk shows captures only a very thin slice of the new Arab media can allow for a more nuanced understanding of how these programs are changing Arab politics.¹⁹ As discussed below, Al Jazeera alone offered a wide variety of talk show formats. Other stations offered even more. Al-Arabiya recruited a number of talented talk show hosts, including Giselle Khoury, Montaha al-Rahmi, Hisham Milhem, Hussein Shobakshi, and Turki al-Dakhil. Most tended to favor more controlled formats and drew guests from the Arab ruling elite. No contrast could be starker than the comparison between each station's signature one-on-one interview program: almost two-thirds of all guests on Giselle Khoury's popular *Bil-Arabi* program on al-Arabiya were current or former high-ranking Arab government officials, while Ahmed Mansour's *No Limits* drew predominantly on independent, Arab nationalist and Islamist writers and activists. Popular programs on LBC, Abu Dhabi TV, and many others offer a wide spectrum of formats—each of which encouraged different kinds of debate and presumably pushed toward different kinds of outcomes. Even religious stations such as Iqra and Risala offered talk shows, as did entertainment-oriented stations.²⁰ Had programs on other stations been included in the discussion to follow, it would only have increased the finding of diversity in forums and approaches—a diversity that can already be seen within Al Jazeera's offerings.

A DIALOGUE MOMENT: THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE

Al Jazeera's talk shows look very different during what I call its "dialogue moments" and its "mobilizational moments." During intense conflicts and moments of crisis, such as the Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank in 2002, the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, or the Israeli-Lebanese war of 2006, Al Jazeera tends to subordinate debate and discussion to traditional news coverage and to mobilizational interviews. These mobilizational moments are offset by "dialogue moments" in which even highly emotional and contentious issues are put up to sustained and focused debate.

In order to illustrate the diversity of these programs and the different ways in which they construct arenas for public discourse, one key "dialogue moment" has been selected: the 2004 American Greater

Table 6.2 Talk Shows about the GMEI

Date	Show	Topic
February 20	More than One Opinion	The Greater Middle East Project
February 28	Open Dialogue	Calls for change in the Arab world
March 13	Open Dialogue	The Tunis Arab Summit
March 16	Opposite Direction	The Middle East project
March 29	<i>Minbar al-Jazeera</i>	Reasons for postponing the Arab summit
April 2	Akhtar Min Rai	Postponement of Arab summit
April 5	<i>Minbar al-Jazeera</i>	Reform projects and the Arab position
March 30	Opposite Direction	The Arab summit and reforms in the Arab world
May 25	Opposite Direction	Future of reform project
June 10	From Washington	The results of the G-8 Summit
June 14	<i>Minbar al-Jazeera</i>	The results of the G-8 Summit

Middle East Initiative (GMEI) for reform. Leaked to al-Hayat in February 2004, the GMEI represented an early draft of an American agenda for promoting reform in the Arab world. Arab governments unleashed a blistering campaign against it, branding it as a form of imperialism, hoping to harness the anti-American portion of the Al Jazeera consensus against the pro-reform portion. Over the next few months, this agenda became the subject of an intense and remarkably wide-open public debate about the desirability of reform and American credibility (see table 6.2). This section looks at 11 Al Jazeera talk shows devoted to the topics. By way of comparison, it was found that only three talk shows dealt with this topic on al-Arabiya: a May 23 episode of *Bil-Marsad*, hosted by the former Al Jazeera anchor Muntaha al-Rahmi; a June 8 episode of *Under the Lights*; hosted by Talib Kana'an; and a June 11 episode of Hisham Milhem's *Across the Sea*.²¹

The Opposite Direction

As noted above, Faisal al-Qassem's *The Opposite Direction* presents a highly contentious, binary conception of debate. Qassem's March 16 program on "the Middle East project" exemplifies this approach. With head of the Arab Lawyers Union Abd al-Azim al-Maghrabi pitted against American-based neoconservative Shakir Nabulsi, Qassem ensured fireworks before the program even began. Qassem's introduction, as always, aimed to heighten the contradictions and to draw the sharpest possible argument. No reasonable middle ground, here: Qassem first ridiculed Arab opponents of the Greater Middle East Project, wondering what they were so afraid of, while lacerating the

hypocrisy of the Arab regimes pretending to take reform seriously. Then a 180-degree pivot: but on the other side, he asked, who wanted outsiders intervening in their affairs? What did Palestine really have to do with the reforms Arabs so desperately needed? Nabulsi, with the twin disadvantages of holding an unpopular position and being off-site rather than in the studio, got to speak first. Qassem, who obviously disagreed with Nabulsi, began by agreeing with almost everything he said before ambushing him with the online voting results showing only 18.6 percent agreeing with his position and then turning the discussion over to the other guest. Maghrebi savaged the UN Human Development Report, usually taken as gospel on Al Jazeera, before wandering into an extended rant against America, Ahmed Chalabi, corruption, and CIA payments to Arab regimes. He left Nabulsi to hopelessly ask that he stick to the subject. Halfway in, the shouting and cross talk had begun. When Qassem went to the phones, it was not ordinary citizens who came on the line but carefully selected participants—including the Egyptian radical Talaat Ramih, who proceeded to insult Nabulsi's family and denounce America, and the America-based Egyptian Magdi Khalil, who generally sympathized with Nabulsi.

Two other episodes of *The Opposite Direction* dealing with this question followed a similar course. One, aired on March 30, focused on the Arab summit and reforms in the Arab world. Qassem's guests were of a high caliber: the Arab League's ambassador in France Nasif Hitti and the leading Paris-based Syrian intellectual Burhan Ghalyoun. Qassem's framing revolved around popular frustration with summits, balanced against calls for realism in the face of Arab weakness. Hitti went first, the turn usually reserved for the target of Qassem's disdain. Hitti expressed his understanding for Arab frustration, but he defended the Arab League's efforts under difficult conditions. Ghalyoun then calmly dissected the Arab summit, the failure of which was preordained as it had no real agenda and could never have one as the system was designed to fail. Even with such luminaries, the structure of the arena drove the debate: words such as "treason" flew around, while Qassem at one point derisively challenged Hitti to explain whether he was speaking as an intellectual or as an ambassador. A May 25 episode on the future of reform projects, featuring the Palestinian Hamdan Hamdan and the Washington-based Ali Ramadan Abu Zakouk, went the same way.

More Than One Opinion

Sami Haddad's London-based *More Than One Opinion* was actually the first Al Jazeera program to deal with the GMEI question. This

program usually hosted three or four guests selected on the basis of their potential contributions to the topic rather than on the basis of their extreme positions. On February 20, Haddad focused on the draft of the GMEI just published in *al-Hayat*. He invited four guests: Patrick Clawson, an American close to the Bush administration; Muta Safadi, a columnist for *al-Quds al-Arabi*; Haitham Manaa, spokesman for the Arab Committee on Human Rights; and Abd al-Wahab Affendi, a prominent moderate Islamist intellectual. Haddad framed the discussion by pointing out that the proposal came from the American security perspective, without consultation with Arabs, and wondered whether there would be a European alternative. On the other hand, he pointed out that the GMEI draft took the Arab Human Development Reports as a key reference, which suggested that it responded to Arab as well as American imperatives. Clawson was invited to speak first and put forward a positive vision of a Bush committed to Arab reform and democracy, and a long series of consultations that had gone into the draft. He pointed to Bush's admission that America had erred in the past by tolerating Arab dictatorships and said that he expected different reactions from around the Arab world. Haddad then turned to Safadi, who dismissed Clawson's remarks as nothing new, shrugging off the initiative as answering none of the Arab world's doubts about American intentions. Haddad pointed out that Bush had been the first American president to endorse the idea of a Palestinian state, to which Safadi responded with scornful derision. The program moved on to Affendi, who expressed outrage at Bush's (mis)use of the Arab Human Development Report (of which he had been a coauthor). Manaa argued that Bush himself was the biggest problem with the initiative. Two-thirds of the way through, Haddad took three phone calls, while the guests argued among themselves. Overall, the tone of the program was critical but relatively calm, with all the guests getting time to speak and little cross talk. Haddad challenged all the guests and did not seem to be overtly favoring any particular position. The one point of consensus was on the need for reform and the oppressive nature of the Arab regimes, although three of the four guests voiced deep skepticism or opposition to an American role.

When the preparations for the Arab summit collapsed shortly after Qassem's show, Haddad hosted an April 2 discussion with Abd al-Bari Atwan (editor of *al-Quds al-Arabi*), Jihad al-Khazen (editor of *al-Hayat*), Tunisian writer Burhan Bassis, and Egyptian parliamentarian Mustafa al-Fiqi. Haddad's introduction asked whether Bernard Lewis had been right to dismiss Arab states as tribes with flags. Since its

creation, Haddad intoned, the Arab League had always failed at everything it touched—why should the Arab street even care anymore? Khazen, speaking first, hoped that at least it had not been an American decision to cancel the summit, but he did not sound convinced. Bassis argued that most Arab leaders preferred to kill the idea of reform, with Haddad pressing him to specifically include Tunisia's president in that roster. Then frequent guest Arwan came on, calmly indicting the entire Arab order for their hostility to reform. Finally Fiqi, after complaining about the marginalization of the guest not in the studio, attempted to defend the honor of the Arab League, to the evident displeasure of the other guests and the host—until Atwan firmly interrupted him to speak on behalf of the Arab street. Fast-paced, intense conversation ensued, with little screaming and few pyrotechnics—and only one caller, who was quickly dismissed.

Open Dialogue

Ghassan bin Jidu's program offers a dramatically different kind of forum, one oriented more around audience participation than around pyrotechnics among the guests. On February 28, bin Jidu hosted a program on the "calls for change in the Arab world." The guests included Tunisian politician Ahmed al-Qadidi, Egyptian Parliamentarian Hamdayn Sabahi, and Layth Kubba, an Iraqi-American official of the National Endowment for Democracy. Bin Jidu framed the discussion around the despotism and democratic deficiency in the Arab world. But bin Jidu highlighted three major critiques: the Bush administration's ethical and democratic failings, that the call for democracy was just another way for Bush to try to rule the world, and that some were happy with things as they are. The questions, as he posed it, were whether democracy under American patronage was realistic and possible and how the regimes would respond. Just as Haddad had given the first word to Clawson, bin Jidu gave the first word to Kubba, who defended at length the American efforts. Sabahi then expressed his doubts that America really wanted change or real democracy. Bin Jidu pushed Sabahi: as much of the Arab political class disliked the Arab regimes and said they wanted democracy, what was so wrong about accepting American help? Sabahi responded that America only wanted to strip Arabs of their ability to resist its hegemony. Qadidi, finally, pointed out that the same America that said it wanted change had been the main support for the despotic regimes it now claimed to oppose. Bin Jidu intervened to suggest that America was capable of changing, pointing to the democracy in Iraq. Qadidi

was unconvinced, leading to an extended exchange with Kubba. At that point, members of the studio audience began to participate. One participant demurred from Kubba's defense of American intentions by pointing out that it was America's interests that concerned him, not its intentions. Another asked about the role of youth in change, another about the role of protests—all told, eight studio guests participated. The tone of the discussion was civil and thoughtful throughout, with the studio participation giving a feel of spontaneity and unpredictability.

Bin Jidu's next program on the topic aired on March 13, dealing with the Tunis Arab summit. Rather than guests, bin Jidu assembled studio audiences in Beirut, Baghdad, and Cairo. He framed the discussion around the frustration felt by at least some parts of the Arab people at the recurrent failures of the Arab League to do anything productive. The show was presented as an opportunity for the assembled Arab citizens to give voice to their hopes and concerns. Bin Jidu began with a member of the Baghdad group member, who expected only frustration from the summit. An Egyptian journalist argued that the legitimacy of Arab leaders should not be questioned, but that Arabs could legitimately demand that they formulate a serious agenda. A Lebanese speaker expressed doubts that Arab leaders could possibly live up to the hopes of the Arab masses, because every Arab summit ended by frustrating the hopes of the people. The conversation bounced from city to city, with some 24 different speakers weighing in over the course of the hour.

Minbar Al Jazeera

Minbar Al Jazeera was built around phone calls, with host Jumana al-Namour sitting at a desk taking calls with no time delay or pre-screening. In a March 29 episode on the postponement of the Arab summit, guest Hamdan Subayhi of the Egyptian Parliament demanded reform, denouncing Arab regimes and rejecting American credibility in promoting it. Most callers agreed. In the April 5 episode, with studio guest Ma'ataz Midani of the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir*, the program focused on Arab attitudes toward reform projects. Namour's short preamble framed the discussion around the American desire for reform and the attitudes expressed by the Arab states. After Midani described the frustrations of the Arab people with the official Arab order's shortcomings, Namour took twenty callers. Most of the callers agreed with the need for reform—who does not want reform, asked one—and most expressed frustration with the failed Arab

summit. Iraq was not a model, American tanks could not create democracy, the Arab leaders were corrupt despots, America did not really want reform—these were common formulations. One expressed hope that Bush would succeed in overthrowing Arab leaders, the more the better. Namour at times had trouble keeping callers on topic, but she maintained a level of civil discourse and prevented loquacious guests from monopolizing the air. A June 14 program on the G-8 Summit went much the same way, with Namour gracefully handling twenty different callers expressing diverse opinions, often going back and forth several times with each before ending the exchange.

From Washington

On June 10, Hafez Mirazi hosted a program from Washington DC on the results of the G-8 Summit, with guests Robert Malley, Layth Kubba, and Magdi Khalil. Mirazi tends to eschew the confrontational tactics of other talk show hosts, preferring a calm, analytical style in which the guests have the chance to develop ideas, and does not take phone calls. All of his guests supported an American role in reform, in marked contrast to the other programs. Mirazi framed the program around the sincerity of the American initiative and the means adopted, and whether the official Arab order and its media onslaught would succeed in containing this initiative. The ensuing discussion was restrained and informative, with most of the contention revolving around American sincerity and whether its intentions could be good in light of its support for Israel and the invasion of Iraq. Viewers would come away from this program with a good sense of the current Washington debates.

Summary and Analysis

Looking at the guests, callers, and frames in these 11 shows reveals much about Al Jazeera's dialogue moments. The sheer volume of the attention Al Jazeera paid to the American proposals in and of itself helped to place the reform question on the Arab public agenda, at a time when Arab regimes might have preferred to ignore it.

As the views of the invited guests were presumably reasonably well-known to the producers, this can be in some sense taken as a reflection of how they intended to construct the terms of debate. Some hosts might try for representativeness, bringing in as accurate as possible a sample of the spectrum of opinion; some might try for polarization, bringing in the most dramatically opposed views on the topic no

matter how unrepresentative such views might be; some might aim for particular types of personalities, regardless of the issue; and some might prefer to construct panels in line with an ideological agenda or a particular state's interest.

In this dialogue moment, Al Jazeera hosted 22 guests across 11 programs. Seven of the guests (counting Kubba twice) spoke in favor of an American role in promoting reform, 15 spoke in favor of reform but against an American role, and none spoke out against reform (even if some might have done so in a different setting). Their debates revolved around the preferred *means* to reform, not the *goal* of reform. The active debates were about whether Arab regimes were capable of or interested in reforming, and how to assess the American initiative—turning many of the debates into referendums on America, not on reform. A healthy number of pro-American speakers appeared, though no Bush administration policymakers did.²² The role of these guests varied markedly depending on how the arena had been constructed, however. On Qassem's show, the pro-American guest was usually a sacrificial lamb, a punching bag to serve as a foil for the host's agenda—although in some cases, a quick-witted or effective guest could subvert this agenda (often to Qassem's evident delight). On almost all of the other shows, however, the pro-American guest was part of a panel rather than being on his own, and had the chance to make his case.

What about the callers and studio guests whose role in the programs is to stand in for "public opinion"?²³ As callers are live and unscreened, and not fully under the control of the producers (even if they are self-selected and influenced by what they have seen), they offer some independent feedback. There were 120 callers or studio audience participants on these 13 programs. Neither Haddad's nor Mirazi's show relied heavily on callers. Qassem prearranges his phone calls, inviting particular personalities to participate—making them better coded as guests than as callers. The 13 callers to the three episodes of Qassem's show tended to appear at defined times in the program, functioning as a break for the guests; often they are well-known, rather than ordinary citizens, and are usually selected to roughly mirror the guests. Thirty three studio guests participated in bin Jidu's two programs. These guests are not randomly selected—in some cases, the audiences were carefully constructed—but they still represent a wide distribution of views. On *Minbar al-Jazeera*, the most unscreened of all, some of the 71 callers to three programs had the unfortunate habit of unleashing torrents of obscenities, or reciting horribly bad poetry, but many offered succinct and well-thought-out arguments about the issue at hand.

The way the reform debate was framed favored reformers against regimes, but it was deeply suspicious of America. This offered the regimes an opportunity to play their regular game of mobilizing fears of external intervention to protect themselves against the demands for reform. Even if very few regime representatives were invited to make their case on Al Jazeera, their campaign certainly helped to frame the terms of Al Jazeera debate as well. This played out differently on Al Jazeera than in the regime-controlled media, however. Few of the Al Jazeera debates gave credence to their claims to be reforming at their own pace, with most remaining scathingly critical of those regimes and contemptuous of their initiatives. Some pushed beyond denunciation. As bin Jidu put it, if change from within is absurd and change from without rejected, then what did Arab reformers expect to happen? The real debate revolved around the relative distaste for Arab regimes and for America—making events in Palestine or Iraq, Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib, directly relevant.

Although many factors go into the formation of political attitudes, survey research shows that mass attitudes did largely reflect this Al Jazeera consensus. In May 2004, Shibley Telhami found that less than 10 percent of respondents in four Arab countries thought that promoting democracy had been an important American motivation for invading Iraq; in October 2005, Telhami found only 6 percent in six countries who agreed that democracy promotion had been an important objective that would make a difference.²⁴

A NEW PUBLIC SPHERE

This close look at the 'dialogue moment' surrounding the American GMEI offers partial support to both sides of the "Arab public sphere" debate. Some of the programs fit Alterman's "professional wrestling" mold, with populism and sensationalism swamping reasoned analysis. But many others did not. From Mirazi's calm presentation of the Washington perspective, to Haddad's lively panel discussions, to bin Jidu's two very differently constructed audience participation programs, to Namour's hosted forum for callers, Al Jazeera offered a diverse array of forums, each privileging very different kinds of participation and debate. Dissenting views and reasoned analysis could be heard, albeit within a generally accepted identity framework. These debates produced a consensus that was hostile not only to the American project, but also to the perspective of the Arab regimes eager to stifle reform. Ultimately, what matters most in the long term is the opportunity for the new Arab public to

argue these issues openly, cultivating pluralism and a culture of contention.

NOTES

1. Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Al-Jazeera, Iraq, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
2. Yusuf al-Awadh, *al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 3, 1999.
3. Faisal al-Qassem, *The Opposite Direction*, March 7, 2003.
4. Quoted by Ibrahim al-Ghurayba on *al-Jazeera*, August 24, 2003.
5. Abdullah Schleifer, "The Impact of Arab Satellite Television on Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World" *Transnational Broadcasting Studies (TBS) Journal*, no. 15 (2005).
6. Abdel Moneim Saced, "The Arab Satellites—Some Necessary Observations!" *Transnational Broadcasting Studies (TBS) Journal*, no. 11 (2003).
7. Jon Alterman, "Slouching toward Ramallah," *Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2002.
8. Kai Haféz, "Arab Satellite Broadcasting: Democracy without Political Parties?" *Transnational Broadcasting Studies (TBS) Journal*, no. 15 (2005).
9. Available online at: <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0410/15/cf.01.html>>
10. Joshua Gamson, "The Talk Show Challenge." *Constellations*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1999): 190–205.
11. Marc Lynch, "Assessing the Democratizing Power of Satellite TV," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies (TBS) Journal*, no. 14 (Spring 2005).
12. In an October 2005 survey—a period in which many observers considered Al Jazeera to be fading a bit from its preeminent position, Shibley Telhami found that only 10% of Arab respondents in six countries claimed to "never watch" Al Jazeera.
13. This data set includes all episodes of *The Opposite Direction*, *More Than One Opinion*, *No Limits*, *Minbar al-Jazeera*, and *Open Dialogue* for which transcripts appear on www.aljazeera.net
14. See Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public*, chapters 4–6, for details.
15. Ayish, in "The Al-Jazeera Phenomenon" (2005)
16. Mohamed Nawawy and Adel Iskander, *Al-Jazeera* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), chapter 5.
17. Mamoun Fandy, "Information Technology, Trust, and Social Change in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2000): 378–394; see 387–388.
18. Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), p. 58
19. Personal interviews, Faisal al-Qassem, Ahmed Mansour, Jumana Namour.

20. Caria Power, "Look Who's Talking," *Newsweek International*, August 8, 2005.
21. According to the archives maintained at <www.alarabiya.net>
22. The Bush administration maintained an unwritten but real boycott of Al Jazeera from late 2001 until 2005.
23. Paolo Carpiagnano, Robin Andersen, Stanley Aronowitz, and William Difazio, "Chatter in the Age of Electronic Reproduction: Talk Television and the Public Mind," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 33-55, quote at 45.
24. Surveys done by Zogby International in conjunction with Shibley Telhami available online at: <<http://www.bsos.umd.edu/SADAT>>. See Mark Tessier and Eleanor Gao, "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2005): 83-97.

CHAPTER 7

U.S. Public Diplomacy and the News Credibility of Radio Sawa and Television Al Hurra in the Arab World*

Mohammed el-Narawayy

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the U.S. government launched a series of multi-million-dollar programs designed under a wide-scale public diplomacy plan to improve America's image in the Middle East and win the hearts and minds of the Arab people. Two such programs, Radio Sawa and Al Hurra satellite television, were supervised by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the federal body responsible for all U.S. international broadcasting. The target audience for Radio Sawa and Television Al Hurra is the younger Arab generation, who will be tomorrow's decision-makers.

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