



The intersection of interests between Al-Jazeera and Al-Qaida in the era of “War on Terror”

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Abstract

This paper argues that there is an intersection of interests between Al-Jazeera, the Qatari TV channel, and Al-Qaida in the absence of a global definition of terrorism. To approach the argument, the paper will discuss analytically why Al-Jazeera has benefited from airing Al-Qaida messages, especially the late Osama bin Ladin videotapes. Also, it will analyze Al-Jazeera’s mechanism of airing these videotapes and whether Al-Jazeera is supporting terrorism or not.

The paper will discuss Al-Jazeera media policy in transmitting Al-Qaida messages. In fact, Al-Qaida leaders have known the importance of media to transmit their messages. Because of Al-Jazeera’s access to massive Arabic audiences, Al-Qaida has used this channel to send its messages. The result was a controversial global fame of Al-Jazeera in the era of “War on Terror.”

Keywords: Al-Jazeera, Al-Qaida, Osama bin Ladin, Terrorism.



Introduction

One of the important Arab TV channels in the era of “War on Terror” is Al-Jazeera, which is an Arabic news channel, born in 1996, when the Emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa, hired staff members of the short-lived BBC Arabic Television and invested US \$140 million to start his channel (Seib, 2008, p. 142). Al-Jazeera has become gradually the most watched TV in the Arab world, where 70% of Arab TV viewers are switching on Al-Jazeera to get their daily news (Rinnawi, 2006, p. 56).

The channel became in the global spot light when it aired an exclusive interview with the head of Al-Qaida, the late Osama bin Ladin, on the 10th of June 1999. The interview was conducted after Al-Qaida bombed two American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Also, Al-Jazeera reported bin Ladin’s son’s wedding on January 9, 2001 (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p. 149).

Meanwhile, the fame of Al-Jazeera in the international scene has increased after September attacks in 2001. One of the main reasons of the fame is Al-Jazeera’s exclusive access to Al-Qaida messages and terrorist leaders. But it is noticed that until Al-Jazeera aired Al-Qaida tapes, American officials praised the channel for its free speech (Miles, 2005, p. 382).

Al-Jazeera’s Controversial Broadcasting of Al-Qaida Tapes

Al-Jazeera reported Osama bin Ladin and Al-Qaida messages several times after the September attacks. On October 5, 2001, Al-Jazeera aired footage of the then Al-Qaida leader bin Ladin and the then second man in Al-Qaida Ayman al-Zawahiri (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p. 149). On October 9, 2001, Al-Jazeera broadcast a taped statement by Al-Qaida’s spokesman (ibid, p. 150). Al-Jazeera also aired on November 1, 2001, a faxed statement from bin Ladin and on November 3 aired a videotape of bin Ladin (ibid, p. 153).

One of the most controversial tapes aired by Al-Jazeera was on December 27, 2001, when the Americans bumped up the price on bin Ladin’s head to US \$25 million, and when there were no news about Al-Qaida leader and there were rumours of his death (Miles, 2005, p. 169).

Between September 2001 and 2006, “bin Ladin has released at least eighteen statements on video or audio tape, which have reached audiences of tens of millions as those statements are



relayed around the globe by the BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera and other television networks” (Bergen, 2006, p. xxvi).

Chris Warren, President of the International Federation of Journalists, argues that, “A factor for change in Arab media has been the establishment of Qatar’s Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel, which has been putting across the views of Osama Bin Ladin and his Al-Qaida network. As the only broadcaster permitted by the Taliban to operate in Kabul, Al-Jazeera has captured worldwide fame with exclusive pictures of bombing raids and air defences, as well as – more controversially– its transmission of taped messages from the leaders of Al-Qaida” (Boafo et al., 2003, pp. 30-31).

In their war against Al-Qaida and Taliban movement in Afghanistan, the Americans bombed Al-Jazeera’s bureau in Kabul on November 12, 2001 (Miles, 2005, p. 164). As Cole (2006, p.14) quotes from the American academic Toby Miller that the attack on Al-Jazeera’s bureau was justified by “Rear Admiral Craig Quigley, the US Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary for Public Affairs, who claimed that Al-Qaida interests were being aided by activities going on there. Al-Jazeera denied the charge. Quigley’s proof was that Al-Jazeera was in contact with Taliban officials.”

Al-Jazeera’s Mechanism of Airing Bin Ladin Videotapes

As it has been shown, Al-Jazeera has gained a controversial global reputation through airing bin Ladin videotapes. But the important question is: how did the channel receive the tapes?

The British Historian, Michael Burleigh (2008, pp. 470-471) explains how Al-Jazeera receives terrorist tapes. He points out, “Trusted Arab or Afghan cameramen are also brought in to record major statements by Ayman al-Zawahiri or the latest front man... The films are copied to CDs and then passed on through several hands to the television station Al-Jazeera.”

Meanwhile, Al-Jazeera refuses to declare how it receives the tapes. It is generally referring in its news bulletins that it received the tapes from an “unknown source”. But the question is: What are the media standards lie behind airing the tapes?

Al-Jazeera’s chief news editor Ibrahim Helal explains the mechanism of airing Bin Ladin video tapes, “We don’t just take any tape that comes to our offices or to the network and put it on air. Before that, we have a meeting to discuss how we should treat the news, and not be



subject to the propaganda... We try to find the right people to talk to us on air... To air statements without any comments, without any opposing statements or view points or analysis, that's when it's propaganda" (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p. 154).

It would be seemed from Helal's explanation that Al-Jazeera is airing the tapes in a professional way to avoid any accusation against the channel of supporting terrorism. But there is one confusing issue, when Helal denies later on rumours that Al-Jazeera received a bin Ladin tape before the September attacks, and that tape was containing threats to the United States (ibid, p. 145).

While there is no tangible evidence that Al-Jazeera received that videotape before the September attacks, there is a precedent that Al-Jazeera interviewed bin Ladin in 1998 and aired it in June 1999 (ibid, p. 149). Later, Al-Jazeera waited several days, before it aired a bin Ladin's tape, which received on November 3, 2001 (ibid, p. 153).

Also, Al-Jazeera never aired Tayseer Alluni's interview with bin Ladin on October 20, 2001. Al-Jazeera did not inform CNN about the interview, where the two channels had a comprehensive sharing agreement, and refused to air the interview due to "editorial standards" (Miles, 2005, pp. 176-177). But CNN obtained the videotaped interview from an independent source and aired excerpts on January 31 and February 1, 2002 (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, pp. 150-151).

Helal also contradicts himself when he said that he had several videotapes of bin Ladin and Al-Jazeera did not broadcast them, because they were deemed not news worthy or of poor technical quality (ibid, p. 153).

There are some questions about the above debate: What are the 'editorial standards' that prevent Al-Jazeera from airing the interview and not telling CNN about it, while the latter received it from an unknown source and aired it? Does CNN know the value and the importance of this exclusive interview with bin Ladin more than Al-Jazeera? What are other parts of the interview which CNN did not air? By comparing CNN and Al-Jazeera, it could be argued that Al-Jazeera lost its credibility when it covered the interview from CNN, while the latter dealt with the interview in a professional and responsible way, filtering what it wants to



screen.

But there is still an important question: If the rumours prove to be fact and Al-Jazeera had obtained a bin Ladin videotape, which contains threats to the United States, before September 11, 2001, what is the judgment in this case?

It would be argued that there are two points of view. First, Al-Jazeera was not professional enough and did not know how worthy that tape was. Second, the channel was collaborating with Al-Qaida to air the videotape after the attacks. In this case, the second point would be the probable one, because both Al-Jazeera and Al-Qaida are seeking to maximize their publicity and fame. Besides, Alluni's interview with bin Ladin supports the possibility that Al-Jazeera may have received bin Ladin tape before the September attacks.

Mutual interests between Al-Jazeera and Al-Qaida

When it is reporting “war on terrorism”, Al-Jazeera uses the phrase “so-called terrorism”. Ahmad Sheikh, deputy editor for Al-Jazeera, discusses how the network uses the term of terrorism, “When it is an American official or someone is saying it, we keep it as terrorism right? But when we are quoting one of them, we say ‘what he called terrorism’. We do not use the word ourselves, because (...) this controversial. Can we agree, first of all, on a definition of what a terrorist act is?” (Japerson & El-Kikhia, 2003, p.125).

This issue of reporting terrorism, where there is no common global definition of terrorism, had been discussed by some academics. Dobkin (1992, p. 30) argues that, “The process of defining and labelling terrorists is central to representations of terrorism and can be explored in the encoding of terrorist events in news accounts.”

Adopting a definition of terrorism is crucial for media outlets to know their limits when they report terrorist acts. In the case of absence of a definition, media outlets are not free in reporting about terrorist organizations, because they may unwittingly support terrorism.

It could be observed clearly that the Al-Jazeera is not a terrorist media outlet. Terrorist outlets are formed by terrorists themselves.

Meanwhile, Al-Jazeera is called bin Ladin's ‘mouthpiece’ in the West (Miles, 2005, p. 112).



Also, on some Western talk shows, Al-Jazeera was condemned as a mouthpiece of terror. For example, CBS's celebrity news anchor Dan Rather wondered whether perhaps bin Ladin might be behind Al-Jazeera (ibid, p. 149).

Meanwhile, Al-Jazeera denies supporting terrorism. It has its own policy in reporting Al-Qaida and its leaders, where the motto of the channel is 'The Opinion and the other Opinion'. Under this policy, Al-Jazeera transmits Al-Qaida messages. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani argues that, "Bin Ladin is a part of the conflict and his opinions must be heard" (Miles, 2005, p. 123). Also, Al-Jazeera news editor Ahmad Sheikh explains this media policy saying, "We believe in objectivity, integrity and presenting all points of view – including both bin Ladin and George W. Bush" (ibid, p. 124).

In his interview with the daily Washington Times on October 15, 2001, Al-Jazeera's chief news editor Ibrahim Helal said, "...Even the politicians in the West need to know him [bin Ladin]; they need to know what Al-Qaida thinks. We are going to know the other side of the story" (El-Nawawy & Iskander, 2002, p. 148).

On the other hand, Al-Qaida and bin Ladin are benefiting well from Al-Jazeera to transmit their messages. For the first man of Al-Qaida, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, two thirds of Al-Qaida's war is through media (Qureshi, 2009, p. 238).

The size of Al-Jazeera's audience is tempting any messages' senders, where terrorists are among them. This issue has been observed by Rushing (2007, p.154) who points out that, "The myth that Al-Jazeera is a tool for the terrorists thrives to this day, probably because the network remains the best method for reaching a widespread Arab audience."

By airing Al-Qaida's leaders, Al-Jazeera has created bin Ladin's image in the minds of people around the globe.

In fact, bin Ladin was willing to be screened by Al-Jazeera (Jacquard, 2002, p. 163). Without Al-Jazeera he was to be described as a "cranky guy in a cave" (Seib, 2008, p. 188).

Reporting terrorists' messages, especially bin Ladin's ones, has generate accusations against Al-Jazeera of supporting terrorism. Carney (2006, p. 8) attributes these accusations against



Al-Jazeera to the fact that this media outlet is the only network to exclusively receive Osama bin Ladin tapes.

Also, Kumashiro (2005, p. vii) argues that Al-Jazeera is inhibiting the American strategy in its “War on Terrorism.”

However, Miles (2006, p. 20) argues that Al-Jazeera is not supporting terrorism. He states: “When Al-Jazeera offers its estimated 50 million viewers exclusive interviews of Osama bin Ladin, it’s easy to confuse access with endorsement. And when a journalist who conducts those interviews is jailed for collaboration with al Qaida, as Tayseer Alluni..., the line between impartial observer and impassioned supporter is certainly blurred... The network has never supported violence against the United States. Not once have its correspondents praised attacks on coalition forces in Iraq. The network has never captured an attack on the coalition ‘live,’ and there’s no evidence Al-Jazeera has known about any attack beforehand. Despite claims to the contrary, the network has never aired footage of a beheading... Allegations of supporting terrorism remain just that—allegations.”

Miles’s argument that Al-Jazeera does not praise terrorists’ attacks seems as a paralogism. Al-Jazeera by opening its air to terrorists, and their supporters, gives indirect praise to terrorism. Such indirect praise may have a bad influence on the audience.

Meanwhile, Mohamed Zayani, who wrote a book “*Al Jazeera phenomenon: critical perspectives on new Arab media*”, does not blame Al-Jazeera for its airing terrorists’ messages. He blames the Arabs political institutions arguing:

“If Al-Jazeera gives the impression sometimes that it is ‘the bin Ladin channel’ it is not because it broadcasts Al-Qaida tapes or toes an anti-Western line, but primarily because the political institutions in the Arab World are largely deficient and do not allow for real participation or promote a governing system based on checks and balances. Not surprisingly then, media democracy in the Arab autocracies often results in a media mobocracy. To ignore this point is to risk treating the problem as the symptom of the problem as the problem itself and, in the process, reduce a complex institutional political problem to a purely ‘media effects issue’” (Poole & Richardson, 2006, p. 187).



It could be observed that Zayani does not deny that Al-Jazeera is supporting terrorism.

By comparing Miles and Zayani's arguments, it can be argued that Al-Jazeera gains viewers and doing "scoop" through airing Al-Qaida tapes and messages. The intersection of interests in the absence of a global definition of terrorism gives terrorists a unique access to the world and Al-Jazeera a controversial global fame. Al-Jazeera is likely supporting terrorism, because it transmits Al-Qaida messages freely, refusing to call it a terrorist organization.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the case of al-Jazeera TV channel, which built its glory on the unprecedented reporting of Al-Qaida, especially in the world of the "war on terror" following the September attacks in 2001 on the United States.

The paper presented discussions from researchers, academics, politicians and journalists about the reasons of Al-Jazeera's reporting of Al-Qaida tapes, namely the videotapes of the late Osama bin Ladin.

Al-Jazeera has benefited from the absence of a global consensus of the definition of terrorism to transmit Al-Qaida messages. It uses the term 'what so called terrorism' instead of 'terrorism' and reports Al-Qaida messages for many reasons. Some of these reasons are giving speech for both sides of the conflict and making a 'scoop.'

The paper alluded that the mutual needs of Al-Jazeera and Al-Qaida leads to transmitting terrorists' messages. This means that Al-Jazeera has supported Al-Qaida which knows the importance of media in its war.



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