



The Rise of Al Jazeera

The Need for Greater Engagement by the U.S. Department of Defense

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In January 2007, I traveled with then Maj. Gen. William B. Caldwell, IV, chief military spokesperson for Multi-National Force-Iraq, to the Al Jazeera Media Network headquarters in Doha, Qatar. At that time, the Iraq government had forced closure of Al Jazeera's television news bureau in Baghdad—accusing it of fomenting discord among the Iraqi people and heightening the insurgency.

Nonetheless, Al Jazeera's popular broadcasts still reached Iraq from Qatar. Our purpose for the trip was to conduct live and taped television interviews and to engage Al Jazeera's senior leadership in dialogue concerning some of its misreporting about our operations. Our experience was remarkable. First, the network's highest leaders warmly welcomed us. They joined us for over two hours of discussions

Bernard Smith, center, a correspondent with Al Jazeera English News Channel, interviews U.S. Marine Corps 2nd Lt. Darren Remington, 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 6, at the Kajaki Dam in Kajaki, Helmand province, Afghanistan, 24 May 2012. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Andrew J. Good)

about major issues both parties were encountering. Second, we participated in several interviews on the Arabic and English channels. Each interviewer challenged our assertions and data but also gave us many opportunities to clarify or reinforce our positions. Last, and perhaps most important, we were asked to come back.

We returned to Baghdad after a full day to discover our appearances on both channels were highly successful in sharing information with the Iraqi population and viewers around the world. Subsequently, we convinced the Iraqi government to reconsider its closing of Al Jazeera's Iraq bureau. Within a month, the chief Iraq correspondent had returned. Al Jazeera asked Multi-National Force-Iraq to provide weekly interviews from Baghdad, using live satellite broadcasting capabilities in the U.S. embassy and interviews recorded at its office. In addition, we made three more visits to Doha, the last in May 2007. These interviews positively influenced "the surge," "Operation Fardh al Qanoon," and "the Anbar Awakening." The Department of Defense (DOD) welcomed the success of this new and constructive relationship and wholeheartedly supported our findings and efforts.

I returned to Doha in October 2011 to discover that the friendly relationship between Al Jazeera and Multi-National Force-Iraq had been neglected: no similar outreach efforts had occurred since our May 2007 visit. Many of the same executives and correspondents welcomed us warmly, but they expressed frustration at the force's unwillingness to speak with them or participate in televised interviews.¹ We found it unfathomable that for nearly five years neither the multinational force nor the U.S. military had fostered a relationship with one of the world's largest and most influential media networks, especially after our efforts had been so effective.

This paper explains why the U.S. military should build and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with Al Jazeera. It summarizes the history of the Al Jazeera Media Network, its relationship with the United States, and its influence as a news media organization. It explains the importance of engagement and offers recommendations for implementation by DOD. It is my hope this information will serve as a catalyst for renewed engagement.

The Rise of Al Jazeera and Its Relationship with the United States

Since its inception in 1996, the Al Jazeera [Arabic for the island or the peninsula] Media Network has been hailed by world leaders for its independent and nonpartisan coverage of global issues, yet hated by those same leaders for its coverage of their domestic news. According to deputy managing director Ehab Alshihabi, it has endeavored to be "an independent and nonpartisan satellite TV network free from government scrutiny, control, and manipulation."² Al Jazeera's reporting, however, has been a flashpoint for U.S. audiences who have found its news coverage provocative and biased against the United States. During an interview in 2001, former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell acknowledged Al Jazeera's importance to the Arab world but alleged it also gave "time and attention to some very vitriolic, irresponsible kinds of statements."³ Washington Post writer Alice Fordham reported that former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had described the network's reporting as "vicious, inaccurate, and inexcusable" in 2004 (but by 2011 he had agreed to an interview).⁴ Cliff Kincaid, writing for media watchdog organization Accuracy in Media, called Al Jazeera "a mouthpiece for al Qaeda."⁵

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Even if such allegations are or were true, today Al Jazeera continues to grow as an influential and adaptive global news provider. In October 2001, it was Al Jazeera that provided the world with the first images of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. In January 2011, it was Al Jazeera that shared some of the first images of the Arab Spring, prompting then Secretary of State

Hillary Clinton to single out its coverage of the events. Writer David Folkenflik reported that Clinton told the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2011, “You may not agree with it, but you feel like you’re getting real news around the clock instead of a million commercials and, you know, arguments between talking heads.”⁶ Senator John McCain, one of the most respected members of the U.S. Congress, also publicly praised the efforts of Al Jazeera during a forum it hosted

in Washington, D.C. Writer Keach Hagey quoted McCain lauding its coverage of the Tunisian uprising:

What Al Jazeera has done is achieved something that all of us I think want to achieve, particularly as we grow older, and that is to make a contribution that will last and will be brought to future generations that lie ahead of us. I want to assure you that these young

Photo from balcony overlooking the main television studio in the Al Jazeera headquarters, Doha, Qatar, 20 November 2011.

(Photo by Wittylyama with no changes made)



people who were able to watch Al Jazeera and be inspired by the example of others is a remarkable achievement.⁷

Laudatory comments from senior U.S. officials in the State Department and Congress now seem to represent the opinions of a growing number of leaders—including some military leaders in the Pentagon and forward deployed around the world.

While assigned to NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan from August 2010 until November 2011, I noticed many senior leaders preferring the Al Jazeera English channel over CNN (Cable News Network) or BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation)—the latter two having been the dominant cable television news choices during my deployment to Iraq in 2006 and 2007. In spite of Al Jazeera's growing credibility and popularity among service members, DOD leaders seem to remain averse to engaging Al Jazeera in on-camera interviews or private meetings. In fact, 2012 discussions and correspondence between this author and several members of the Al Jazeera English news bureau in Washington, D.C., confirmed this observation.⁸ Although many U.S. leaders now acknowledge Al Jazeera as a quality news provider, appearances by current or former DOD senior leaders have been, for the most part, few and far between. Adm. Jonathan Greenert, chief of naval operations, appeared in March 2012, but few senior leaders in the Pentagon have appeared in Al Jazeera taped or live interviews during their current postings. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen appeared in January 2011, and former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates appeared in September 2009 and June 2010.⁹ To their credit, these senior leaders' appearances were perceived as extremely positive by the Al Jazeera staff in spite of some difficult topics.

Given the change in U.S. defense strategy from an operational focus in Afghanistan and Iraq to globally integrated operations, a shift in communication strategy is needed. In the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations: Joint Force 2020*, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey highlights the new operational challenges: "As we have learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, military actions will receive intense media scrutiny, a dynamic that potentially invests otherwise inconsequential actions with strategic importance."¹⁰ In the past, DOD public affairs could focus media relations efforts on domestic audiences. Today's

global realities and pervasive information environment, however, require renewed emphasis on engagement with global news networks that can inform and educate international audiences about DOD's strategy, policies, and operations. Given Al Jazeera's growing audience, global presence, and increased influence, the network provides a viable alternative to other global television news networks. Perhaps now is the time for DOD's senior leadership to take a more deliberate and positive approach with Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera's Growing Audience

Today Al Jazeera claims more people in the Middle East and North Africa watch their news "than all other pan-Arab news channels combined."¹¹ Al Jazeera English alone claims to reach "more than 260 million households in more than 130 countries."¹² Al Jazeera English launched in November 2006, coinciding with the network's ten-year anniversary, to provide global news coverage to the English-speaking world. Al Jazeera America began broadcasting late in 2013. Al Jazeera's plan is to "build a distinctively U.S. channel for American viewers with 60 percent of the content produced locally and 40 percent coming from Al Jazeera English, their global network."¹³ From 2006 to 2012, the network reports the number of viewers increased 400 percent, and it claims a steady rate of increase continues.¹⁴ With the establishment of Al Jazeera America and its 12 U.S. news bureaus, Al Jazeera's global audience could exceed 300 million in 2014.¹⁵

Al Jazeera also has expanded its web-based media presence. In 2012, the Al Jazeera English website received over 150 million visits with more than 40 percent of all visits coming from the United States. VidStatsX.com ranked the Al Jazeera YouTube site as the eighth most viewed news and political producer (two positions ahead of CNN).¹⁶ Al Jazeera English claims 1.96 million followers on Twitter, and their Facebook page shows 3.6 million "likes."¹⁷

The innovative program "The Stream" features an interactive dialogue that leverages social networking sites Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Google Plus to generate instant audience-based commentary and feedback. Popular among the young and educated international audience, it covers topics ranging from how Israelis perceive Iranians to how Americans view gun control. The Stream gained over 200,000 viewers

in its first year.¹⁸ Al Jazeera's dramatically expanding audience coupled with its visual programming and web-based platforms could provide many opportunities for the DOD to inform and educate large audiences of all ages around the world.

Al Jazeera's Global Presence

Since its modest beginnings in Doha, Qatar, where it began broadcasting a part-time satellite television channel in Arabic with fewer than 150 employees and fewer than a million viewers, Al Jazeera has grown to over 80 news bureaus across the world. Most are located in Africa, Asia, and Central and Latin America. By comparison, CNN has closed many of its international bureaus and today only maintains 44 editorial operations, 14 in the United States.¹⁹ Al Jazeera employs more than 3,000 staff members across the globe, including more than 400 journalists from more than 60 different countries. Al Jazeera English, the largest of the Al Jazeera channels, employs "more than 1,000 highly experienced staff from more than 50 nationalities, making Al Jazeera English's newsroom among the most diverse in the world."²⁰ Operating from its Doha headquarters and two different news centers 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Al Jazeera now broadcasts into more than 130 different countries (over two thirds of the world's countries) in languages including Arabic, English, Bosnian, and Serbo-Croatian, with plans to add a Turkish channel later this year.²¹

One of Al Jazeera's founding editorial philosophies was to cover news stories from areas of the world typically underreported, such as Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East and other parts of developing Asia—sometimes known as "the global south." Seeing an opportunity to reverse the established information flow, mainly from "the global north" (North America, developed parts of Europe, and East Asia), Al Jazeera has markedly outdistanced its competitors in this effort. Researcher Tine Ustad Figenschou studied Al Jazeera news programming during two months

in 2007 and two months in 2008 and found that Al Jazeera English had covered the global south with in-depth reporting more often than the global north.²² It is safe to assume this trend continues with current programming. As U.S. strategic defense priorities



Bernard Smith, left, correspondent, and Ben Foley, center, cameraman, both with Al Jazeera English News Channel, interview a local Afghan teacher in Kajaki, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 23 May 2012.

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Andrew J. Good

now focus on the Asia Pacific region, the Middle East, and North Africa, Al Jazeera can make a significant contribution toward helping the defense community understand and communicate with those nations.²³

In 2011, Al Jazeera provided significantly more coverage of global issues than news media based in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center's "The State of the News Media 2012" report, in 2011 CNN had devoted about 34 percent of its coverage to international events and matters that concerned U.S. involvement abroad.²⁴ The report stated, "the percentage was considerably less, 20%, on Fox, and even smaller, 14%, on MSNBC."²⁵

Al Jazeera's global reach enables rapid cross-sharing of information between its news channels. During the Arab Spring, it took footage from "citizen journalists" and its professional correspondents in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt and rebroadcast it over its channels around the world, with commentary in the viewers' languages, well before its competitors. To provide timely coverage, many news providers in the United States could only rebroadcast Al Jazeera's footage.

Al Jazeera's Greater Influence

Al Jazeera's greatest strength may be its ability to provide uncensored global news to its Arab audiences and an Arab perspective to other viewers. For these reasons, Al Jazeera has attracted loyal and diverse audiences all around the world. Its influence on its viewers' global perspectives is unmatched.

Al Jazeera's viewers are loyal because it adheres (for the most part) to its foundational principles, such as reporting both sides of every story. Adopting the motto "the opinion and the other opinion," and creating programs "intended to stimulate debate and controversy," it has challenged the status quo of Middle Eastern media and the absolute power of authoritarian governments.²⁶ The network strives for objectivity and balance by providing a variety of programming marked by diverse viewpoints and opinions. Unlike other media outlets within the Middle East, Al Jazeera has sought to open dialogue on some of the most controversial topics in the Arab world, such as government corruption, illicit sex, and other taboo topics. Even in topics previously covered from only one perspective by Arab media, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Al Jazeera has offered both sides the opportunity to present their viewpoints and perspectives.

Another principle that has dramatically bolstered Al Jazeera's audience loyalty is its effort to serve as "the voice of the voiceless." Its reporting highlights many of the ills of the global society and the lives of those

who suffer, especially those who perceive themselves as disenfranchised. News coverage is not limited to official statements from those in power. Reports try to bring out the human interest perspective of every story, including civilian casualties from war, starving families in refugee camps, and widowed spouses of police officers.

Al Jazeera's wide popularity and tremendous influence extend beyond the Arab world to the worldwide Muslim community, a community that the DOD and U.S. Government have struggled to communicate with. In fact, recent findings by the Pew Research Center suggest Muslim countries' opinions of U.S. policies have decreased by 19 percent from the time of a similar study in 2009.²⁷ By contrast, Al Jazeera enjoys relative popularity and trust within these same countries. According to author and Middle Eastern affairs expert Dr. Glenn Robinson, "the data I have seen shows that not only is Al Jazeera by far the most watched source of regional and international news among all Arabs (at about 50 percent), Al Jazeera is also the most trusted source of news in the Arab and Muslim worlds."²⁸

Recommendations for Fostering a Culture of Engagement with Al Jazeera

In the spirit of Abraham Lincoln's famous quote, "I don't like that man. I must get to know him better," I believe the most important first step the DOD can take to foster a culture of engagement with Al Jazeera is to understand and learn to appreciate, the organization. The simplest way to accomplish this is through face-to-face meetings with the senior leadership of Al Jazeera in Doha and its leaders in Washington, D.C. Although scheduling and travel could pose challenges, a first step such as this would demonstrate a willingness to move toward a better relationship. Although the DOD media relations team should spearhead this effort, DOD senior leaders should be active participants, especially in visiting the headquarters in Doha. At either location, all initial conversations should be informal and off



Ben Foley, left, cameraman, and Bernard Smith, correspondent, both with Al Jazeera English News Channel, ready their equipment for a broadcast from Forward Operating Base Kishitwaln, Helmand province, Afghanistan, 20 May 2012.

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Andrew J. Good

the record, simply to build trust. Senior leaders could see firsthand how Al Jazeera produces and distributes news to its channels. Future senior leader engagements could be scheduled, including office calls within the Pentagon or with the service chiefs and their staffs.

The next step would be for the senior leaders to participate in a more structured event, such as an editorial board (a gathering of news producers and regional news directors, if available). The format could be negotiated, but these types of engagements are most beneficial when they are informal and conducted with a low profile. This makes it easier to hold in-depth discussions of topics needing significant context and explanation. These types of engagements can help news producers understand DOD concerns, policies, and responses to issues.

DOD senior leaders should then make themselves available for on-camera interviews with Al Jazeera. The interviews should be closely coordinated in advance to define the focus and the boundaries. To be sure, the line of questioning on any Al Jazeera program will be fast paced and wide ranging. However, with adequate preparation and a firm mutual understanding of each party's expectations, DOD senior leaders and Al Jazeera can achieve their desired goals. Al Jazeera must provide experienced and noncombative interviewers, especially for the initial interviews of the most senior DOD officials. Following interviews, senior leaders can determine the benefits of the engagement and provide feedback to the Al Jazeera senior leaders on their experience.

The 2012 Al Jazeera interview with Adm. Jonathan Greenert set a good precedent. In addition, a reporter for Al Jazeera English was embedded with the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet for an exercise in September 2012.²⁹ These types of actions set the tone for service-wide engagement and can lead to other opportunities. Services could consider ways to incorporate Al Jazeera into their professional military education curricula. It is common practice at almost every level of professional military education to schedule a media panel or invite members of the press corps to deliver remarks to the students, faculty, and staff. When I have attended such events, representatives from Al Jazeera are noticeably absent. Inviting Al Jazeera to participate in a venue such as an international media panel at the U.S. Army War College would certainly spur intense debate and dialogue

during the event. Moreover, it would help assuage many of the stereotypes and biases on either side.

Finally, no group understands the importance of improving relations with Al Jazeera more than those in DOD public affairs. Unfortunately, most DOD public affairs professionals have limited knowledge or experience with the network. This, however, can be remedied by including Al Jazeera representatives as guest speakers at the Defense Information School, where all the services send their public affairs specialists. Other opportunities to expose DOD public affairs students to Al Jazeera could include group visits to its news bureau in Washington, D.C. Students could participate in editorial boards with the bureau's senior leaders and correspondents. This could help public affairs students build new relationships with members of the press corps—a critical requisite for success as a public affairs professional. Additionally, the military service public affairs leaders should consider Al Jazeera for opportunities as part of the Training with Industry program. Rather than sending mid-level public affairs officers to work with marketing firms for a year, a viable option would be to send officers to work with the Al Jazeera English bureau or the new Al Jazeera America headquarters in New York City.

Much of DOD's resistance to engagement with Al Jazeera comes from inadequate culture and language skills. Unlike the U.S. State Department, within the military only a handful of public affairs professionals have a working knowledge of Arabic. This places our public affairs specialists at a disadvantage in understanding broadcasts or conducting interviews; our leaders and public affairs teams must rely on contracted translators and interpreters. The services should consider identifying top-performing public affairs specialists and allowing them to become regional public affairs specialists complete with culture and language training so they can communicate with their regionally aligned audiences and media.

Conclusion

As DOD faces certain budget cuts and our forces become more "globally responsive," it will be incumbent upon our leaders to ensure the world understands U.S. military efforts. As the face of the U.S. national security strategy, people around the world can see U.S. forces as agents of occupation or

ambassadors of good will, sometimes depending on the news they receive. Whether in words or deeds, we must seek out opportunities to better educate and inform global audiences in times of peace and war.

Embracing a culture of engagement with Al Jazeera would symbolize a willingness to listen and a willingness to learn—qualities we have espoused often but failed to follow. ■

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Notes

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