

Topic Page: [Al Jazeera \(Television network\)](#)

Definition: **Al Jazeera** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

a Middle Eastern news and current affairs television network, based in Doha, Qatar.

Etymology: Arabic *al-gazal-xabra* the island



Image from: [Qatari staff work at Al Jazeera's new... in Encyclopedia of Political Communication](#)

Summary Article: **Al Jazeera Television**

From *Encyclopedia of Political Communication*

Founded in 1996, the Qatari satellite broadcasting station Al Jazeera has become the most popular news network in the Arab world and has a worldwide reputation. The channel is generally recognized for making a breakthrough in the history of Arab television by having introduced a liberal TV model that is largely free of government control into the Arab media landscape. The network was founded by Qatar's ruler, Emir Al-Thani, who hired a large number of journalists from BBC's closed-down Arabic service. The "Arab CNN," as Al Jazeera is often called, aims at combining U.S. news and politainment formats with BBC's journalism ethics of "neutrality" and "objectivity" while carrying out an Arab news agenda. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, D.C., and in the course of its coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a heated debate over the network broke out and has received enormous attention.

Within the first years of existence Al Jazeera won around 40 international prizes from organizations such as Index on Censorship. What made the network so attractive to Arab viewers, as well as to international observers, was the channel's often rigorous break with social and political taboos. Female circumcision, the Syrian regime, or the West-Sahara conflict: These are just a few of the many issues Al Jazeera covered over the years that no other Arab TV station had ever tackled before. On talk shows such as *The Opposite Direction* with moderator Faisal al-Kasim, a show based on the *Crossfire* model, opponents from different ideological camps, representatives of governments, and opposition forces directly confront each other. For many, Al Jazeera has reanimated the idea of free public speech in the Arab world.

As a consequence, Al Jazeera has been strongly criticized by almost all Arab regimes, most of them authoritarian in nature, who fear the loss of their TV monopoly. Many offices of the network in Arab countries have been closed time and again. The Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) denied Al Jazeera a regular membership, and many advertisers close to Arab regimes from Saudi Arabia and other countries boycotted the network.

But governments also understood that such pressure made the network even more popular as a mouthpiece of Arab populations. Although there are no solid figures at hand and research concentrating on media usage patterns is still in its infancy, Al Jazeera is widely considered the leading news network in the Arab world. Thirty-five to 45 million regular viewers who receive the channel through Arabsat and other satellites.

In terms of finance and organization Al Jazeera is a hybrid that fits into none of the standard Western categories of state, public, or private broadcasting. Without the protection and financial engagement of Emir al-Thani and the state of Qatar Al Jazeera would not exist. However, the channel views itself as being independent and indebted to Arab public opinion. It is also “private” in the sense that no institutional checks-and-balances or a clear programmatic seem to exist—as in the case of German public TV, for instance (“*Programmauftrag*”). Moreover, state subsidies are not guaranteed indefinitely, and the network has frequently proclaimed the need to become commercially independent. On the whole, Al Jazeera’s financial and organizational situation remains fragile and vulnerable.

Without a binding legal framework the channel could be closed down from one day to the next, although that is quite unlikely since Qatar’s image has profited enormously from Al Jazeera’s worldwide standing. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine how the network can be transformed into a satisfactory public TV model without prior democratization of the Qatari political system. The state is able to prohibit any coverage on Qatar’s domestic policies. And the natural ally of the network, its viewers, demands a close orientation toward Arab political culture—a tendency that has been criticized by many as leading to a certain bias in political coverage.

Despite the large debate on the network no comprehensive content analysis has yet been undertaken. However, several long-term phases of the coverage can be discerned. Between 1996 and 2001 the taboobreaking opening of democratic debate dominated. Also, for the first time Israeli voices could be heard and seen on Arab TV justifying the Israeli government’s measures against the Palestinians. But after the outbreak of the second Intifada uprising in the occupied territories in 2000, following the events of 9/11 and the succeeding American interventions in Afghanistan, an inflammatory style of reporting against Israel and the United States predominated. The day-long coverage of the burial of Sheikh Yassin of the Palestinian Islamist organization Hamas, regular shows by leading Islamist preachers such as Yusuf Qaradawi with his sometimes controversial support of Palestinian suicide bombers, and the frequent airing of Al-Qaeda videos showing messages of Osama bin Laden and others have gained the network the aura of a mouthpiece of terrorism—although Western channels have often bought such material from Al Jazeera.

In recent years Al Jazeera has extensively covered the still modest signs of democratic awakening in the Arab world with long reports on the oppositional Kifayah movement in Egypt or the Lebanese popular resistance against Syrian occupation. On the whole, Al Jazeera’s political coverage is a mix of professional journalistic neutrality and consumer-oriented populism in times of crisis that seems comparable to the style of the large U.S. television networks.

Such comparison seems to be supported by the fact that Al Jazeera has agreed on a number of cooperation agreements with CNN, ABC, NBC, Fox, and many other Western networks on the exchange of programs. In practice, however, such exchange is often confined to the issue of terrorism and control of images and videos rather than allowing news texts that could help Western audiences understand Arab views on world events. The often applauded reversal of the North-South flow of news and information and the globalizing effects of new Arab satellite broadcasters should not be overestimated.



Qatari staff work at Al Jazeera's new state-of-the-art newsroom, June 15, 2005. As it marked its 10th anniversary on October 31, 2006, the news channel announced that it was extending its reach to audiences by launching its English-speaking service November 15, 2006.

Source: AFP/Getty Images.

Further Readings

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