

IS THERE A POSITIVE SIDE TO AL JAZEERA?

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In the rogues' gallery of contemporary American politics, one of our chief villains is the Qatari satellite television station, al Jazeera. This station at various times has been charged with being a bin Laden mouthpiece, pro-Saddam Hussein, insensitive to U.S. casualties, and willing to find bad motives in just about everything that the United States does in the region. Many of the charges against al Jazeera are overblown, but it does sometimes broadcast offensive images, and has been hugely critical of what it views as a lack of American concern about collateral damage to civilian areas in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was the first station to broadcast bin Laden tapes as news, and it is hardly reassuring that an al Jazeera reporter being tried in Spain in September 2005 was found guilty of collaborating with al Qaeda. With anti-Americanism already raging through the Middle East, can there be anything positive about al Jazeera?

Actually there is. By allowing al Jazeera to operate, the small pro-Western state of Qatar is freed from the charge of being a U.S. stooge. The Qataris have used this freedom to become a reliable and trustworthy U.S. ally. This is significant since two of our most important military bases in the region are on Qatari territory – the al Udeid airbase, and Camp as-Saliya which serves as the forward headquarters for the U.S. Central Command. Allowing such bases to operate during both the Afghan and Iraq wars was not popular in the Arab World, but the Qataris were willing to stand up to outside pressure and help the United States meet its military goals. Moreover, anti-U.S. critics of the Qataris have to weigh the fact that they are dealing with a state that can defend itself politically over a television station that reaches up to 50 million people.

In addition to its willingness to work with the United States, Qatar is also a key moderate state on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (a role it might find difficult without the political protection of al Jazeera). Qatar has maintained trade ties with Israel since 1996 despite strong pressure to renounce them. Additionally, the Israelis recently supported Qatar's candidacy to become a nonpermanent member of the United Nations Security Council in response to a public Qatari request for them to do so. The Qataris also have been extravagant in their praise of the recent Israeli decision to withdraw their troops from the Gaza Strip and suggested that now is the time to improve Arab-Israeli relations. In a recent al Jazeera interview, Qatari Foreign Minister Hamad al Thani stated that Arab governments needed to talk to the Israelis "face to face" and rise above the view that Israel is the enemy.

It is also worth noting that al Jazeera has a way of upsetting a variety of nations, not just the United States. The Iranians, for example, were livid with the April 2005 al Jazeera coverage of riots in the Iranian city of Ahwaz by Iran's Arab minority. This reporting caused the Iranians to close al Jazeera's Tehran Bureau in an action which undoubtedly supports Iran's efforts to market its own region-wide Arabic news station, Al Alam television. Al Jazeera's Tehran Bureau remained closed in early 2006, at the

time of this writing. Moreover, a variety of critics detest al Jazeera's willingness to broadcast segments on the Arab reform movement. Last year's voting in Lebanon was extensively covered by al Jazeera, although many state-controlled Arab media chose not to dwell on it. Al Jazeera also has covered comprehensively the activities of the Egyptian reform movement Kifaya (Enough), and has run broadcasts on Morocco's commission on human rights, as well as the Kuwaiti women's suffrage movement.

None of this suggests that the United States should fail to confront and rebut al Jazeera when disagreements exist. Nevertheless, the al Jazeera question is not a black and white issue. Al Jazeera has shown responsiveness to some specific Western objections in the past, even to the point of firing irresponsible reporters. Moreover, U.S. efforts to pressure the Qataris into exercising rigid control over al Jazeera only confirm critics who believe that the United States does not support Arab democracy unless its practitioners are respectful of U.S. priorities. Perhaps, therefore, we should learn to disagree with al Jazeera when it is in our interests to do so, but we must also understand that al Jazeera may serve our interests as well as threaten them.

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