

# The Egyptian Regime, Al Jazeera and the coverage of Egyptian affairs post-Arab Spring: A history of hope and oppression

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As the world marked World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2015, Al Jazeera English (AJE) interrupted its regular programming for its senior management and journalists to discuss the state of media freedom around the world (Al Jazeera English, 2015). The Qatar-based network has long championed freedom of speech in the Arab World by giving airtime to dissenters, opposition groups, and controversial figures. Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) has made its name in the 1990s and 2000s exposing the misdeeds, human rights abuses, and corruption of Middle-Eastern regimes. This stance came with a hefty price: Al Jazeera's anchors became persona non grata in many Arab countries, and its offices were forcibly and regularly closed throughout the Arab World. During the past two decades, strained relationships between the Qatari government and other Arab governments became the norm rather than the exception, and ambassadors were often recalled from the Qatari capital in protest against the network's coverage. The latter's journalistic culture struck a chord with viewers. When Al Jazeera English (AJE) was launched in 2006, it was available in more than 80 million households worldwide. By early 2012, this number had jumped to about 250 million. According to the AJE website, the channel's programmes can be seen on television in more than 100 countries on six continents.

## **The strategic positioning of Al Jazeera English**

Unlike global competitors, such as the BBC and CNN, and unlike its sister channel Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA), which considers itself as a transnational news provider for Arabic-speaking viewers, AJE didn't construct any particular national lens. Rather, it positioned itself as representative of the 'global south' and its peoples.

The availability of sizeable budgets for foreign correspondents and bureaus has also contributed to the rise of AJE. In contrast to the budget cuts suffered by most Western news networks, the Qatar-based outlet has considerable resources for international field reporting. According to Tony Burman, AJE's former Managing Director:

...the mainstream American networks have cut their bureaus to the bone... They're basically only in London now. Even CNN has pulled back. I remember in the 1980s when I covered these events there would be a truckload of American journalists and crews and editors, and now Al Jazeera outnumbers them all... That's where, in the absence of alternatives, Al Jazeera English can fill a vacuum, simply because we're going in the opposite direction (Campbell, 2010).

## **Covering the Arab Spring**

AJA and AJE were well equipped to cover the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings across North Africa and the Middle East. From January 2011 onwards, mass protest - first in Tunisia, then in Egypt and other Arab nations, such as Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria - confronted repressive regimes and military juntas. These demonstrations called for an end to nepotism and corruption, improving economic conditions, democratic representation, and the protection of human rights.

In Tunisia, a young vegetable cart owner called Mohamed Bouazizzi immolated himself after being humiliated by police, and his action ignited several protests across the country. Al Jazeera was one of the first outlets to broadcast pictures of his self-immolation, even though its bureau had been closed for years by the Tunisian regime. The Qatar-based network proved very skillful in countering attempts by the regime to restrain the movement of journalists. Using mobile phone footage and social media, Al Jazeera outmaneuvered its competition by grasping from day one the meaning and magnitude of the protests. They eventually brought the demise of the Tunisian dictator, an outcome many in the region considered impossible. But it was only the prelude of other events to come.

## **Shaping the narrative in Egypt**

The 24/7 coverage provided by the Al Jazeera network during the Arab Spring events, combined with viral social media, online blogging, and mobile telephony, vividly publicized the uprisings. This boosted the spirits of activists and encouraged more resistance and mass defiance. Jordanian Maisara Malass, an opposition activist, considered Al-Jazeera a "media brigade" whose coverage had helped "to spread the revolution from one city to the other" (Zayed, 2015).

When protests spread to Egypt in the first months of 2011, AJE's coverage of the major events taking place was sharp and relentless. This attracted world attention to the demonstrations and gave events a human dimension, thereby creating a bond between viewers in their living rooms and the protesters in Tahrir Square. When they shook the foundations of the Egyptian regime, ultimately forcing President Hosni Mubarak to quit power, many people around the world embraced the narrative conveyed by Al Jazeera and other media networks, namely that Egypt was about to embrace democracy and the rule of law. At this stage, the then U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, acknowledged the major role played by AJE in the Arab Spring, stating that "viewership of Al Jazeera is going up in the United States because it is real news" (Mirkinson, 2011). Such surprising praise from someone within the American decision-making elite reversed the earlier stance of the George W. Bush administration against Al Jazeera (because of its alleged anti-U.S. bias in covering the 'War on Terror'). Acknowledgement of AJE efforts also came in the form of the prestigious *Columbia Journalism Award (2011)* bestowed by Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. AJE was lauded for "singular journalism in the public interest" (Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2011).

## The Egyptian regime strikes back

It thus became clear that AJA, AJE, and other media had helped effect regime change in Egypt. Their role was clearly not to the liking of the state security apparatus. The latter immediately took steps to curtail freedom of expression and control the narrative in Egyptian and international media. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which is a statutory body of senior Egyptian military officers that succeeded the ousted president Mubarak on 11 February 2011 and supervised the transition period, gave the impression that media freedom was the way forward. They abolished the Ministry of Information in February 2011, allowing state media to host the activists who led the revolution, as long as equal praise was given to the role played by the military in toppling Mubarak. In the meantime, SCAF also authorized sixteen new private satellite television channels, which started broadcasting. According to Rasha Abdulla, Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the American University in Cairo (AUC), during the early SCAF period “the editorial lines seemed to suggest that Mubarak had always been the absolute menace, the revolutionaries the absolute angels, and the army the savior of the revolution” (Abdulla, 2014: 13).

## Crackdown on journalists

Six months later, the honeymoon between the army and the revolutionaries was over. SCAF reinstated the Ministry of Information in July 2011, and bloggers and journalists who criticized the army were subject to intimidation, military trials and investigations (Abdulla, 2014: 14). The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) documented all sorts of repressive measures taken against journalists and bloggers in Egypt during the SCAF reign, and registered over a hundred cases of abuses perpetrated by the military authorities. The military also extended the use of emergency laws in September 2011, threatening media organizations with the full wrath of the law should they be accused of ‘spreading rumors’. In this context, security forces raided the offices of Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr (Al Jazeera Live Egypt), a channel dedicated to covering Egyptian affairs following Mubarak’s ousting from power. The raid occurred after the channel was accused of broadcasting without a permit. Concurrently, the military authorities decided to stop granting new permits to satellite broadcasting networks and to “prosecute satellite channels deemed threatening to the stability of the country” (Egypt Independent, 2011).

The violations of press freedoms continued - albeit to a lesser degree - under the rule of President Mohammed Morsi, who served as the first ever democratically elected head of state in Egyptian history (from 30 June 2012 to 3 July 2013). The closure of online English-language newspaper *Egypt Independent* was a press freedom low point during the Morsi era (McRobie, 2013). However, Al Jazeera was not targeted during this period. Some observers accused Al Jazeera Live Egypt of giving considerable airtime to pro-Muslim Brotherhood news and views; interviews with the leaders of the organization were frequently aired (Al Qassemi, 2012). Such criticism cannot be separated from the Qatari government’s support for the (now-overthrown) President Morsi. This took the form of huge investments and loans to keep his regime afloat.

But since a military coup overthrew President Morsi, and instated General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in July 2013, attacks on journalists have become more systematic. The regime of el-Sisi seems more brutal toward the media than its predecessors, including Mubarak. The CPJ observes that since the ousting of Morsi, journalists and freedom of expression are increasingly under threat, with several television stations either provisionally or indefinitely shut down. Many popular television anchors

that rose to prominence after the Arab Spring, or are considered as detractors of the junta, were purged from the airwaves. Instances of direct government interference in media affairs happen on a daily basis. The regime only tolerates a servile state-aligned media establishment (Elmeshad, 2015).

Since the coverage of AJA and AJE was focusing on the failures of the new regime and the widespread repression that is taking place in Egypt, the new junta in power reacted by implementing more repressive measures against the Qatar-based network. The subsequent arrest of three journalists from AJE (Peter Greste, Mohamed Fahmy, and Baher Mohamed) on 29 December 2013 can be explained in this context. The three journalists were accused of airing falsified footage intended to damage national security and being part of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, which is now considered a terrorist group in Egypt.

### **A bleak future for press freedoms**

The AJE journalist Peter Greste was released in February 2015, but the saga continues for his two colleagues still detained in Egypt. While the Egyptian authorities are primarily responsible for their ordeal, there has been nonetheless criticism from AJE insiders (including the imprisoned Mohamed Fahmy) that Al Jazeera tend to endanger their staff to get the story. Fahmy has mentioned the sloppy safety and administrative procedures leading to his own arrest (Fahmy, 2015). And beyond Al Jazeera's imbroglio with the Egyptian junta, the future of media freedoms in Egypt looks bleak. According to CPJ statistics from March 2015, there were at least nine journalists detained in Egypt just for doing their job. They were charged with bogus crimes, such as incitement to violence and participation in illegal protests. Furthermore, at least 10 journalists have been killed since 2011, six of them since the events that removed President Morsi (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015).

When Qatar was pressured by the late Saudi King Abdullah to conduct a total reorientation of its foreign policy and to reign in Al Jazeera, the leadership made minor concessions. These included the closure of Al Jazeera Live Egypt (which was by then broadcasting from Doha) (BBC 2014). But in Saudi Arabia, a new king has been enthroned with a different agenda. Consequently, the Qatar-based network's coverage remained defiant, maintaining the same critical editorial line within Egypt, thus provoking the ire of the Egyptian Junta. This state of affairs suggests the cat-and-mouse game between the junta and the Qatar-based network will continue for a while against a backdrop of further encroachments on media freedoms.

## AJE Journalists' Detention: a timeline

DATE	EVENT
29 December 2013	Peter Greste and Mohamed Fahmy arrested in police raid on Cairo's Marriott Hotel. Baher Mohamed later arrested at home.
31 December 2013	Egypt's top prosecutor orders the journalists held for 15 days on suspicion of joining a terrorist group, referring to the Muslim Brotherhood of ousted Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, and for spreading false news harmful to state security. The order was renewed on nine days later.
13 January 2014	More than 50 news organizations, including The Associated Press, call on Egyptian authorities to release the detained journalists.
29 January 2014	20 people, including the three journalists, referred to trial, charged with spreading false news, belonging to a terrorist organization and operating without a permit.
20 February 2014	First court appearance of the three journalists, who pleaded not guilty and shouted from the dock that their prison conditions are "psychologically unbearable." Human Rights Watch decries the trial as "politicized."
10 April 2014	Egyptian prosecutors present their first evidence against the defendants, playing to the court an assortment of news clips about an animal hospital with donkeys and horses, and footage about Christian life in Egypt. Defense lawyers – and even the judge – dismiss the videos as irrelevant.
23 June 2014	Defendants sentenced to seven years, with Baher Mohamed receiving an additional three years.
24 June 2014	President Sisi rejects calls from the United States and other Western governments that he pardon or commute the sentences of the three journalists.
23 July, 2014	The judge releases his reasoning for his sentence, saying the journalists were brought together "by the devil" to destabilize the country. The main evidence was footage produced by the journalists that included voices critical of the government.
12 November, 2014	President Sisi signs decree allowing repatriation of foreign prisoners.
1 January, 2015	Highest court orders retrial, but the three journalists not allowed bail
1 February, 2015	Peter Greste leaves Egypt on a flight to Cyprus, following an apparent approval of his deportation by the country's president. Fahmy and Mohamed remain behind bars.
2 February, 2015	Mohamed Fahmy gives up his Egyptian citizenship to be able to defend himself as Canadian citizen and benefit from the same treatment as Peter Greste.
8 February, 2015	Egypt sets February 12 as the date for the retrial of Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed.
May, 2015	Retrial proceedings of Mohamed Fahmy and Baher Mohamed continue.

## Author Bio

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