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Arab satellite channels and the battle of Tehran



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Millions of Arabs have been captivated by images from Tehran. The names of Mousavi, Karroubi, Rezai and of course Ahmadinejad echoed in every single coffee house in the Arab World, which also became a battlefield of news channels. The question repeats itself: How well did they fare? Which channel attracted the biggest number of Arab viewers? The importance of the answer is that the winner constitutes an indication of the general trend in the Arab World and whether it is moderate or extremist.

Since the bloody Saturday demonstrations in Tehran, the Saudi-funded Al Arabiya has been dominating the news scene while the Qatari-funded al-Jazeera offered modest coverage in comparison to the magnitude of the event, which has been of crucial importance on both Arab and international levels. To cover up for this humble performance as far as the Iranian scene is concerned, al-Jazeera offered extensive coverage of the upheavals in Somalia. Naturally, viewers tuned in to Al Arabiya. For the past four years, the Arab World has been divided between two news channels, Al Arabiya from Dubai and al-Jazeera from Doha. Very few watch the American government-funded al-Hurra or BBC Arabic.

The mystery behind the absence of al-Jazeera

What was the reason behind al-Jazeera's absence from the Iranian scene although it has correspondents all over Tehran and who are given complete freedom there? As for the reason why Al Arabiya emerged as the winner despite closing down its office in Tehran, it is quite obvious. Since the first hour of the unrest, Al Arabiya aired a shocking footage of the demonstrations and bloody clashes with the Basij and in which gunshots were heard. The video, which Al Arabiya obtained from BBC Persian, was broadcast without a comment, a rather unprecedented way of news broadcasting. For almost 10 hours, Al Arabiya kept broadcasting a rerun of the controversial video. On the other hand, al-Jazeera only ran a brief story on the clashes then moved to Somalia right away. Al Arabiya cancelled most of its programs and dedicated hours on end to live coverage and extensive reports as well as exclusive interviews with Iran's opposition figures via the phone from Tehran. For an entire week, hours of extensive coverage, special reports, and breaking news banners kept viewers glued to the screen as Al Arabiya brought Tehran to their houses.

Al Arabiya and al-Jazeera exchange roles

This leads me to analyze the nature of the news scene due to the crucial role it plays in the political arena in the Arab world especially in the way it exercises a major influence on the opinions of viewers. Had al-Jazeera presented full coverage of the events in Iran within the framework of its usual political stance, what happened in Iran would have been a conspiracy by the West. However, because Al Arabiya came first, it became obvious to all Arab viewers that what is happening in Iran is a crime and that its regime is a big lie. Al-Jazeera was struck with a mysterious curse that turned it from a fiery, controversial channel that "stirs stagnant waters," according to its famous slogan, to a passive, timid one. Al Arabiya exchanged roles with al-Jazeera and is now the fiery, exciting channel. Al-Jazeera used to side with the people whereas Al Arabiya sided with the regimes. Now it's the other way round.

Al Arabiya started gaining popularity in Sudan since it became the source of the statements by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Through Al Arabiya, ICC prosecutor made the first statement about issuing an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. Since then, Bashir has been accusing Al Arabiya of waging a war against him. The same happened in Nouakchott when al-Jazeera supported the military coup d'état led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz while Al Arabiya supported the opposition. Al Arabiya also opened fire on other prominent figures like Hassan Nasrallah and Khaled Mashaal.

The selling of the Qatari channel

With the exception of al-Jazeera's exaggerated support of Hezbollah against Egypt after the Gaza war, al-Jazeera has called a truce with Arab regimes in Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and recently Egypt. Al-Jazeera even aired an interview with Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem in which he announced that he is ready to sell the channel and admitted that media battles are becoming intolerable and that the fading of al-Jazeera's star is due to "orders from above." The Tehran battle was the winning card for Al Arabiya and the losing card for al-Jazeera and neither for other news channels. Al-Jazeera is, in fact, repeating what it had done when Hezbollah seized Sunni Western Beirut on May 7 when it only supported Hassan Nasrallah and offered very limited coverage of what was really happening unlike Al Arabiya that broadcast the entire battle.

The biggest loser in the Tehran battle is, once again, al-Hurra channel. Another loser, though to a lesser extent, is the BBC Arabic, which focused on interviews and, thus, was boring and lacked the excitement that has always distinguished the prominent British channel.

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