Satellite television stations are subtly challenging the state’s monopoly over the means of persuasion and information in the Arab world. A Qatar-based television channel, Al-Jazeera’s coverage of Syrian politics exemplifies how satellite television is changing the conditions of communication between citizens and states in the Arab world, creating more moments in television that are not as controlled by states. The significance of the Syrian case lies in the fact that the Syrian regime is highly authoritarian and still maintains near total control of information and communication. The following examines Al-Jazeera’s reportage of several issues and implications of the peace process on the regime’s survival ability.

Since the 1963 military coup, the Syrian authoritarian regime closed down all independent newspapers, books, broadcasting, advertising, and visual arts, which might be threatening the security of the state. Starting in 1974, the Syrian media became a vehicle to promote the cult of Asad.

**Syria’s style of censorship**

The Syrian government has developed a long list of taboo topics. For example, it does not tolerate criticism of the following topics: the president and his family, the ruling Ba’ath Party, the military, the legitimacy of the regime, the sectarian question, the government’s human rights record, Islamic opposition, involvement of Syrian troops in Lebanon, graphic descriptions of sex, and materials unfavorable to the Arab cause in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The government also has not tolerated any independent source of information considered threatening to, or critical of, the regime. A case in point is the crackdown on independent Lebanese newspapers in Lebanon immediately following the Syrian military intervention there. Moreover, human rights organizations documented the arrest, expulsion, and even assassination of prominent journalists by Syrian security forces. Nonetheless, the Syrian government has not succeeded in maintaining total control over the dissemination of information. Syrian citizens turned, before the age of satellite television, to Western radio stations such as the BBC, Monte Carlo, and to a lesser extent the Voice of America.

Occasionally, Syrian media, especially newspapers, have been allowed and sometimes encouraged to criticize corrupt officials in the bureaucratic. While the Syrian government has strived to maintain its strict control over the dissemination of information, it has been less successful in controlling the receiving satellite dishes than in restricting the internet.

**Al-Jazeera’s contesting coverage**

Al-Jazeera’s coverage of Syrian politics has grown to manage more assertive coverage of Syrian politics, pushing the limits with each report. The coverage has included three types of issues: indirect reference, direct confrontation, and human rights and Islamic fundamentalist implications. In the Arab world, direct discussion of the Syrian regime and society have not always been appreciated by the Syrian government. On More than One Opinion, Najib Ghasbani – the author of this article – being interviewed by the bannered Syrian Muslim Brothers for two hours on the program Without Bounds. Both the Syrian and general Arab audiences had the opportunity to hear a very moderate voice advocating democracy, demanding the Syrian role in the peace process. Having confronted an armed Islamic movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Syrian government considered this topic taboo. Al Jazeera interviewed the leader of the banished Syrian Muslim Brothers for two hours on the program Without Bounds. Both the Syrian and general Arab audiences had the opportunity to hear a very moderate voice advocating democracy, demanding the Syrian role in the peace process. Having confronted an armed Islamic movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Syrian government considered this topic taboo.

The second category of coverage concerns the Syrian role in the peace process. While the overall coverage is somewhat informative and contain negative or critical comments, the reporting has not been sufficiently critical of the Syrian regime. For example, Al Jazeera did not report the coup attempt in Lebanon, the October War, or the invasion of Lebanon. Instead, the channel has focused on the Syrian-Hezbollah conflict, the Palestinian Intifada, and the situation in Iraq. The channel has not been critical of the Syrian government’s role in the peace process. While the Syrian government has not been critical of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, it has been less critical of the Syrian-Israeli peace process.

**Response and effects**

Al Jazeera soon became a major contender of news for many Syrians. Some Syrian viewers, however, have complained about the channel’s pro-Israeli bias and its tendency to highlight Arab states at the expense of the Palestinian cause. The channel has also been criticized for its lack of balance and its pro-Israeli bias. Some viewers have noted that the channel’s coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more critical of the Palestinian Authority than of the Israeli government. The channel’s coverage of the Syrian-Israeli conflict has been more critical of the Syrian government than of the Israeli government.

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Notes:
1. Akthar min Rais, head of the Centre for Pluralism, with whom the author discussed the failure of the official Arab media.
7. After his inauguration, Bashar issued two important directives pertaining to the development of a ‘new media discourse’. The first directive asked editors of print and broadcast media to embark on a ‘calm, logical, and balanced media address’, which would ‘respect the intelligence of the reader and avoid the people’s anger’.
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