

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/07/07/the-attack-on-al-jazeera/print/#comments_controls

The Attack on Al Jazeera

By Stanley L. Cohen
July 7, 2017



Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple, who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free open encounter?

—John Milton, Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing

The march from fake news to no news is as straight and unbroken as the runway from Washington D.C. to Riyadh.

Tyranny knows no truth... just unbridled power and a drive to extinguish it whether by mob appeal or the slam of a prison gate. Today, we are witness to a unity of drive and purpose, in both West and East, where full scale attacks on debate and dissent have become very much the norm... with news outlets shuttered, journalists jailed and thinkers shamed.

Whether it is the most recent royal family in Washington, the perpetual caste in KSA or the wannabe one in Cairo, diversity of thought, identity and purpose is under siege in ways not seen since Galileo dared to suggest that a central tenet of Christian cosmology... the Earth lies at the center of the universe... was factually untrue. Charged with heresy, Galileo was forced to recount and abjure.

Today, in many places, the channel of peeling truth from cosmetic reality has moved well beyond the mere papal process of 16th century Europe to the full-on embrace of singularity of thought... be it coerced by force, banishment or closure.

Nowhere is this more painfully evident than it is, today, in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) where a coalition of states, along with an assist from the African state of Egypt, have challenged Qatar's independence by a subterfuge checklist that, in reality, boils down to their fear of Al-Jazeera and what it represents.

Since its genesis, Al-Jazeera has served as much more than a mere signpost of speech or thought... popular or otherwise. Its existence, alone, stands as a safety valve against those closed societies that embrace repression as so much a check against the light of day of which they fear.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has no autonomous media, nor does it endure political parties, unions or human rights groups. The government treats online journalists, writing for state approved news outlets, the same as it does print and broadcast journalists... subjecting them to exacting regulation and content based intimidation.

The internet, alone, is the sole means, within KSA, by which a relatively robust exchange of information, from within and without the state, can circulate. However, its closely monitored "citizen-journalists" are subject to strict filtering mechanisms that scrutinize and, often, block their internet content.

Indeed, authorities regularly monitor websites, blogs and chat rooms, as well as the content of e-mail and mobile-phone text messages.

Sites that contain "harmful", illegal, anti-Islamic, or offensive material are blocked... as are those that carry criticism of Saudi Arabia, the royal family, or the other Gulf States.

So, too, sites that call for political reform or are critical of the current political and social landscape are blocked, as are human rights websites (“Country Profile: Saudi Arabia” August 6, 2009) making the country one of the world’s most repressive with respect to freedom of expression whether online or in print.

For those whose print and internet communications, or blogs, cross the rigid and narrow divide of government criticism, they run the risk of swift state reprisal... often arrest and detainment, without specific charges, for critical or controversial remarks. Others have been accused of blasphemy, inciting chaos and defaming the king and state which can bring punishments that can run into years of imprisonment and, at times, include flogging.

Several cases speak volumes about a Saudi state that, very much the norm, seeks to silence dialogue with ruthless punishment meted out against those who dare to dissent.

For example, Raif Badawi was arrested in 2012 on a charge of “insulting Islam through electronic channels.” Subsequently he was prosecuted for apostasy and criticizing the regime on his blog... which included material critical of “senior religious figures” and suggested that Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University had become “a den for terrorists.”

For pure speech, and nothing else, Badawi was convicted on several charges, in 2013, and sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes. In 2014 his sentence was increased to 10 years in prison, 1000 lashes, and a fine. The first 50 lashes were administered on January 9, 2015 with the remainder postponed more than a dozen times since.

Following his arrest, Amnesty International designated Badawi a prisoner of conscience, “detained solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression.” Human Rights Watch has noted: “The charges against him, based solely to Badawi’s involvement in setting up a website for peaceful discussion about religion and religious figures, violate his right to freedom of expression”.

Meanwhile, Badawi’s attorney, Waleed Abu al-Khair, himself a prominent human rights activist, continues to serve a 15 year sentence on charges imposed on him in 2014 stemming solely from his criticism of human rights abuses in KSA. Among other things, Waleed was found guilty by a security court of:

... Disobeying the ruler and seeking to remove his legitimacy

... Insulting the judiciary and questioning the integrity of judges

... Setting up an unlicensed organization

... Harming the reputation of the state by communicating with international organisations

... Preparing, storing, and sending information that harms public order.

In March of 2016, Saudi Arabia sentenced journalist, Alaa Brinji, to five years in prison plus an eight year travel ban for tweets in which he criticized religious authorities and voiced support for the right of women to drive and for jailed human rights activists.

KSA is ranked 168th out of 180 countries in Reporters without Borders (RSF) 2017 World Press Freedom Index.

Bahrain

Bahrain, an island Kingdom located off of the eastern coastline of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf, is no more respectful of speech and press freedoms. It was listed 164th in the most recent RSF world rankings. It sees independent and vigorous journalism as an ever-present danger to its ability to control the state's domestic narrative and to maintain political power.

Infamous for jailing large numbers of journalists... in particular photographers and cameramen... Bahrain has a recent history of targeting political dissidents, as well. Their crimes are typically little more than the will to challenge blanket restrictions upon assembly and prohibited speech.

Journalists and dissidents convicted of charges that include unlawful demonstrations and supporting "terrorism" typically receive long sentences. Often mistreated in detention, many have been imprisoned for life. Others have been sentenced to death.

Not long ago, a raid by Bahrain security forces left five people dead and hundreds detained. Recently, a court sentenced two young anti-regime protesters to death; two others were imprisoned for life and eight received sentences of 3 to 10 years. Nine of the pro-democracy activists saw their nationality revoked.

Just this past month, Al-Wasat, the island's sole independent newspaper, was closed in yet another government effort to control the free flow of information among its population of a bit more than one-million.

Describing it as a temporary suspension "until further notice", the government accused this highly respected newspaper of "dissemination of information that affects national unity and the kingdom's relationship with other countries."

Egypt

When it comes to state repression of media freedom, Egypt stands alone. As we say in the law, it's "sui generis"... one of a kind.

Since the revolution of 2011, and the subsequent military coup of 2013, more than a dozen journalists have been killed. None have been the subject of proper and thorough investigation. No one has been held accountable. Countless others have been injured, many tortured, by security officials after having been swept up for little more than covering demonstrations.

Although precise figures are difficult to obtain, it has been estimated by various human rights groups, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), that, today, hundreds of journalists, bloggers and social media activists are entombed in maximum security prisons throughout Egypt. Many will spend years in detention... uncharged and untried. Others face long jail terms, including life sentences, in political witch hunts targeting those seen as enemies of the state... often subjected to mass trials, by the hundreds, denied even a modicum of due process. In 2015 alone some 600 activists were sentenced to death in show trials of pro-democracy campaigners.

Under a terrorism law adopted in August 2015, journalists are obliged to report only the official version of “terrorist” attacks. Failure to do so renders the offender subject to punishments ranging from a loss of government license to fines and imprisonment.

In the summer of 2015, three privately owned newspapers were prevented from printing, articles that were critical of the Egyptian President.

Earlier this year, the government banned circulation of an edition of an Egyptian weekly newspaper with an image, on its cover, of famed ex-football player Mohamed Aboutrika and his mother. Designated a “terrorist” for his support of the presidential bid of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi in 2012, today, Aboutrika lives in Qatar where he works as a sports analyst.

Recently, Egyptian authorities suspended two issues of a privately owned newspaper after it published a front-page editorial blaming the interior ministry for the Palm Sunday church bombings,

In December of 2016, Egypt’s president ratified a new law regulating media outlets which extended his control over them. The law creates three regulatory bodies... two to oversee state-owned press and media organizations and a Higher Council for Media Regulation to “regulate” all of Egypt’s media outlets... whether public or private. It has the authority to fine, or suspend, publications and broadcasters, and to issue or revoke foreign media permits.

To understand the full nature and extent of Egypt’s current effort to control what is reported, and how, one need only consider who has been targeted, and for what, since the military coup that brought al-Sisi to power.

In 2016, the head of Egypt’s Journalists’ Union and two board members stood trial in Cairo... charged largely with spreading “false news.” Described as an “effort to muzzle the media,” after a seven month trial the three were convicted of harboring two journalists who wrote for a website critical of the government and sentenced to two years in prison and fined \$650.00.

Other prominent journalists have been swept up in what has been described as little more than a government effort to create a “state of fear.” According to CPJ, photojournalist Mahmoud Abou-Zeid, known as “Shawkan”, has been imprisoned since 2013, along with 700 others, for covering the dispersal of a pro-Muslim Brotherhood sit-in. Recipient of the CPJ International Press Freedom Awards in 2016, “Shawkan” remains imprisoned and untried despite deteriorating health.

Others, on a CPJ list of detained Egyptian journalists, include Mahmoud Abdel Naby, a correspondent for Rassd News Network (an alternative media network based in Cairo), who has been imprisoned since 2013. Also arrested, in 2013, were RASSD executive director, Abdullah Al-Fakharany, co-founder, Samhy Mostafa and Amgad TV presenter Mohamed al-Adly.

According to CPJ, the trio was charged with “spreading chaos” during the government dispersal of the sit-in at Rabaa Al-Adaweya.

CPJ has also adopted as human rights cases the matters of Abdallah Shousha from Amgad TV, Omar Abdel Maqsooud from Misr al-Arabia, Sabry Anwar from El Badil, Mohamed El-Battawy from Akhbar Al-Youm, Abdelrahman Abdelsalam Yaqot from the Karmoz website and Hisham Gaafar, director of the Mada Foundation for Media Development

Others held include freelance journalists Hassan El-Kabbani and Ismail Alexandrani, detained for several years without trial, and well-known human rights activist and blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah, who is serving a five-year prison term based upon protest charges alone.

Egypt is ranked 161 out of 180 countries in RSF’s 2017 World Press Freedom Index.

The GCC Attack on Al-Jazeera

According to the Egyptian human rights group, the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, and news reports between May24 and June 12, 2017, state authorities blocked access to at least 64 websites... including dozens of alternative news sources. The number was considerably higher than the 21 sites security officials announced had been censored for “spreading lies” and “supporting terrorism.”

The information blackout came in the wake of similar moves by GCC members, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, which blocked access to websites, in their respective countries, run by the Qatari-funded network Al-Jazeera.

Although the GCC claimed the block was necessitated by an alleged hack of Al-Jazeera and an ensuing fake news report, it proved to be the first information broadside in a coordinated effort to control an independent narrative available to several hundred million viewers in one of the most volatile regions of the world.

In the days to come, what began with a move to control website access quickly escalated to a complete break in diplomatic relations in which the GCC and Egypt demanded of Qatar that it close the international network, Al-Jazeera, and defund various other news sources including Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, Middle East Eye, Arabi21 and Egypt’s Rassd News Agency.

Although other demands were made of Qatar, it is clear that a prime focus of GCC and Egypt, in the staged diplomatic crises, is a desire to once again limit access to independent news sources by the region’s restive populations.

Indeed, in the 1980's and 1990's, Saudi Arabia controlled almost all of the public dialogue through the purchase of most of the popular Arabic newspapers employing many of the region's most respected journalists of the day. Although the government permitted some diversity of thought and expanded coverage of Arab and international issues, no critical discussion of Saudi Arabia and its royal family, direct or otherwise, was permitted.

To some degree, this standard was relaxed by virtue of a joint venture between the Saudi controlled Orbit Communications Company and BBC which introduced the Arabic language television station to the region. It proved, however, to be short-lived... closing less than two years later because of growing censorship demands, by the Saudi Government, which included refusal to permit the station to air prominent dissident viewpoints.

That was to soon change. In 1996 Al-Jazeera opened, staffed largely by those same dissenting voices that lost their jobs with the Saudi closure of the Arabic-language BBC news service. Though funded by the Qatari government, the new network was empowered, like no other, with broad editorial discretion.

From the beginning, Al-Jazeera was controversial... broadcasting dissenting opinions on important issues, including from opposition figures silenced domestically in their own nations, at a level unheard of in the region.

Al-Jazeera's availability throughout the Middle East changed its information landscape . . . introducing a level of freedom of speech, on TV, that was previously unheard of in the region.

In just five years, it became the most widely viewed Arab television station for news. Within ten years, three-quarters of Arabs looked to it as their primary source of information.

Al-Jazeera became an instant counter-force to the tailored news of Saudi and Egyptian controlled media in particular. It presented controversial viewpoints regarding the governments of many Arab states on the Persian Gulf... including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and, even, Qatar. It also aired particularly contentious views about Egypt and its judiciary.

From its start there was a backlash against Al-Jazeera which manifested itself in a variety of ways and intensified over time. Thus, in May of 2002, Bahrain banned Al-Jazeera's broadcasts from within its borders... due to the channel's comments about Bahrain's municipal elections... labeling it as "serving Zionism". Saudi Arabia soon jumped on this row and reportedly pressured advertisers to avoid the channel almost from the day it opened its doors.

Most contentious of all, however, was its coverage of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions during the Arab Spring. Criticized by some for its "pro-democracy" bent, Al-Jazeera was, all at once, greeted with tremendous support by people in the streets yet disparaged by autocratic states in the region which feared the reach of the democratic movement to their own capitals.

Of all the states in the region, none has been more fearful or punitive towards Al-Jazeera than Egypt... which has long targeted it in a transparent drive to maintain government control of

information for this nation of ninety million having seen both a revolution and military coup in this decade, alone.

Indeed, Egypt's recent decision with the GCC to use Al-Jazeera as a handy pretext to divert attention from internal political repression and failure is by no means of recent vintage. Since the military coup of 2013, the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has proven resilient, and arguably desperate, in looking elsewhere to craft convenient foils in its own political and economic missteps.

To look toward Egypt, as a veritable primer in state repression of free speech and information, is a perverse understatement. Thus, not long after the coup, charges were filed against legendary Al-Jazeera television host, Ahmed Mansour, an Egyptian national, who was tried, in absentia, on allegations dating back to Tahrir Square in the final days of the successful 2011 revolution.

Tried in secret, without notice, counsel, or an opportunity to be heard, Mr. Mansour's persecution, like so many others in Egypt, are routinely rejected by the broader world community as so much a sham... a political vendetta lacking independence and reliability.

Indeed, when Egypt sought Mansour's extradition from Germany to face a fifteen year sentence, it refused the request taking note that "Egypt's judicial system is politically motivated." Not long before, the African Union, of which Egypt is a member, concurred..., holding that the Egyptian judiciary is politically controlled and corrupt.

On other occasions the al-Sisi government has purposely targeted Al-Jazeera journalists. In 2013, ten of its employees were accused of spreading "false news" while covering public demonstrations against the military coup that removed President Mohammed Morsi. Ultimately, only three... Baher Mohamed, Mohamed Fahmy and Peter Greste... were detained. Greste was held in prison for over a year, while Mohamed and Fahmy spent 437 days in detention before being released.

This past December, Al-Jazeera journalist Mahmoud Hussein, an Egyptian national, was detained upon arrival at Cairo's airport. Not long thereafter, Egypt's interior ministry accused Hussein of "disseminating false news and receiving monetary funds from foreign authorities in order to defame the state's reputation." Six months later he remains in custody.

In May, a Cairo court sentenced a former editor-in-chief of Al-Jazeera Arabic, Ibrahim Helal, to death, charging him, in absentia, with endangering national security.

Information Control

Make no mistake about it, the demand that Al-Jazeera close its door, as so much the price of regional "peace", is nothing short of a desperate autocratic drive to strip the human spirit of its thirst for knowledge and its innate right to grow. It will not happen.

For time immemorial, those in power... whether by force of arms, royal edicts or the shade of a ballot box too small to effect meaningful change... have sought to control the dialogue as a desperate effort to hang on to power that is not theirs to own. It will not happen.

The marketplace of ideas transcends time and place. It is a community that knows no wealth, authority or limits. It is a boundless souk that welcomes all... no matter race, religion or gender.

From the time of Plato to Avicenna to de Beauvoir to Marx, women and men of principle and courage have struggled in pursuit of truth. Many have paid the ultimate price, in their search for it, while others have fled it... sated with the fleeting comfort born of fame or fortune and little else.

Al-Jazeera is one voice of many. It competes with a crescendo of other information partisans who seek to influence today's vision and tomorrow's journey. This competition of ideas demands the freedom that is untempered speech... if it is to work, and work well.

At times, Al-Jazeera is surely right... at others, mistaken. Ultimately, it matters not. Al- Jazeera is a much needed voice... and a welcome space for the freedom of voices in agreement and opposition.

Voices bring thought. Thought brings information. Information is knowledge. Knowledge is power.