

Documentary on Al-Jazeera and Iraq war

Rather timid considering the circumstances

By Joanne Laurier
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Control Room written and directed by Jehane Noujaim

Al-Jazeera, the pan-Arab satellite news network, is the subject of the documentary, *Control Room*, directed by Egyptian-born filmmaker Jehane Noujaim. Noujaim, who worked with documentarians D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus on movies such as *Only the Strong Survive* and *Startup.com*, focuses her film on the period from the onset of the US war against Iraq on March 19-20, 2003, through the taking of Baghdad less than a month later.

Headquartered in Doha, Qatar, less than 10 miles from the United States military's Central Command (CentCom) and some 700 miles from Baghdad, Al-Jazeera provides service to 40 million Arab viewers. The network's origins date back to 1995 when the Emir of Qatar took advantage of the disintegration of a deal between the British BBC and the Saudi-owned Orbit Communications, which had been providing Arabic newscasts for Orbit's main Middle East channel, to hire most of the BBC Arabic Service's editors, reporters and technicians. This was the nucleus of Al-Jazeera, founded in 1996.

The film opens with a comment by Al-Jazeera's senior producer, Samir Khader, arguing that propaganda is a key component in prosecuting a war. The network staff is shown struggling with the question of journalistic objectivity as the onslaught against the Iraqi population unfolds. After being told by an American journalist that cajoling the US military press officer might help with relations, an Al-Jazeera reporter lashes back: "How can I smile when my people are being killed?"

Attempting to keep the war coverage limited to that of its "embedded" reporters, the US government aimed to stifle any independent reporting of the atrocities in Baghdad and elsewhere. For this reason, Al-Jazeera earned the wrath of the Bush administration. Highlighting this fact, the film contains the following images and passages:

* A voice-over by Bush describing Al-Jazeera as "the mouthpiece of Osama bin Laden."

* The ravings of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld: "Al-Jazeera lies to the world—it won't take long for them to be discredited...We know that Al-Jazeera has a pattern of playing propaganda over and over and over again...We're dealing with people who are perfectly willing to lie to the world to attempt to further their case."

* A bitterly ironic condemnation in March 2003 by Bush of Al-Jazeera's interviews with US prisoners: "I expect POWs to be

treated humanely, just as we are treating the prisoners we have captured humanely."

* The American bombing on April 8, 2003 of the Al-Jazeera headquarters in Baghdad that killed correspondent Tarek Ayyound. The strike was followed by attacks on satellite station Abu Dhabi TV and Baghdad's Palestine Hotel, the latter having housed more than 200 international journalists.

Dividing its time between the Al-Jazeera newsroom and CentCom, *Control Room* provides a somewhat valuable—albeit limited—glimpse of the filthy and cynical nature of the American colonial project in Iraq. The film's production notes state that the director traveled between the two headquarters "to capture the staging of the war in Iraq and the media's role in writing history... But as Americans witnessed US victory at home, a different story unfolded on television sets throughout the Arab world. Qatari-based Al-Jazeera broadcast images of Iraqi civilian casualties and American POWs that were taboo in the American media." Taboos that Al-Jazeera producer Khader calls the "human cost of war" and "the only true journalism in the world." On this level, *Control Room* proves that Al-Jazeera ranks far superior to its corrupt American counterparts.

The prophetic words of a translator in the Al-Jazeera newsroom describe today's reality in Iraq: "Americans are radicalizing people—who will take matters into their hands." Al-Jazeera film footage shows an Iraqi woman standing in front of her demolished home: "Welcome to my home, Mr. Bush—Where is your humanity?" Another film clip shows a bloody Iraqi man: "I don't want this freedom, I don't want this democracy!" Such moments never reach an American audience.

At CentCom's temporary media center, where international journalists gathered during the run-up to the Iraqi invasion, US press officer Lieutenant Josh Rushing, earnestly (and naively) tells an Arab correspondent: "We are not here to occupy your land or take your oil," a statement that he begins to question by the film's end. (After the film, the Pentagon reassigned Rushing, barring him from commenting on *Control Room*. "[A]s a result, the 14-year career military man, recently promoted to captain, plans to leave the Marines," according to *Salon.com*.)

Al-Jazeera's video images of American soldiers brutally searching civilians, battering down doors to homes, terrorizing inhabitants and generally abusing the Iraqi population contrast with and refute the complacent lies repeated at military press conferences conducted by General Vincent Brooks. He puts

forward the line, swallowed whole by the American press, that the US military is doing everything to prevent civilian casualties.

In one of *Control Room*'s most ludicrous moments Brooks presides over a press conference and announces the publication of decks of playing cards (for field soldiers) printed with pictures of "Iraq's Most Wanted." Brooks flashes the cards and exits quickly, leaving bewildered journalists to beg for a glimpse of the 55 "outlaws".

Apart from Rushing, the military press personnel are uncultured and uninformed. They prate absurdly about the Iraqis in the process of being liberated, or already semi-liberated or fully-liberated.

The liberal-bourgeois Al-Jazeera journalists demonstrate a certain level of honesty and insight, particularly when viewed side-by-side with the American war correspondents. The film prominently features Hassan Ibrahim, a Sudanese journalist (and former classmate of Osama Bin Laden in Saudi Arabia). Ibrahim believes that Al-Jazeera is the only free news station in the Middle East and perhaps the world. He opines that "the White House has been hi-jacked by a bunch of oil men. The American people will be the only ones to stop this madness."

After a Rumsfeld sound bite, Ibrahim says: "Rumsfeld said showing dead Americans is against the Geneva Convention. What about Guantanamo Bay? What about Iraqi soldiers paraded around on TV? What about an illegal war? Oh, *now* there's a Geneva Convention!" And later on when other colleagues express their pessimism about defeating US militarism, Ibrahim adds some perspective: "Eventually you will have to find a solution that does not include bombing people—'Democratize or I'll shoot you!'"

Ibrahim also criticizes the western media for its chauvinism and bald ignorance. Citing a BBC report about a group of children who were described as cheering for Bush, Ibrahim derisively reveals that in fact the youth were screaming: "God-damn Bush! God-damned Bush!"

An even more revealing episode occurs when the CentCom monitors show the authentic footage of the capture of Baghdad. Instead of cheering Iraqis toppling the statue of Saddam Hussein—images aired repeatedly on US television—the central square was largely empty, except for a handful of men who brought down the statue. The staged event was described by Al-Jazeera as an international media performance.

CNN's Tom Mintier comes across as having a modicum of integrity, although passive. One has the feeling that events have passed him by (he began his career as a cameraman in Vietnam). The younger more brazen NBC correspondent, David Shuster, is shallow and cynical (Shuster finds the looting of Baghdad buildings by Iraqis "hilarious...It's almost like 'The Price is Right'").

At the moment when US troops are entering Baghdad in a deadly and bloody march, General Brooks attempts to divert the international media with the phony story about the Jessica Lynch rescue operation. Mintier complains about the military's "effort to manage news in an unmanageable situation—they buried the lead [the US conquest of Baghdad] and they're good at it." This is the most severe criticism offered by any American journalist to the despicable, non-stop lies of the military propaganda endeavor.

The lack of journalistic integrity that characterizes the US reporters was alluded to in *Control Room*'s production notes: "Unfortunately, most of the journalists had signed contracts with their networks that they would not voice their personal opinions about what was happening during the war. There was a lot of fear at the time. Peter Arnett [CNN] had just been fired for taking to Iraqi television."

It is a very different situation for the Arab media, as director Noujaim asserts: "You have an Iraqi translator at Al-Jazeera translating Bush announcing the freeing of the Iraqi people and then calling home to see if his family was okay. The war was a part of their lives, though they weren't in the center of things. There were strong emotions about what was happening which contrasted with many Western journalists who had never been to the Middle East, and their jobs were mainly to get the most [which wasn't much] out of the press officers."

Inadvertently, *Control Room* does expose the essentially conservative character of Al-Jazeera, the voice of a definite bourgeois layer in the Middle East. The impulses and responses of the Iraqi people to the war and occupation—shown in the Al-Jazeera coverage—are inevitably more radical than the reactions of the station's management and staff.

Senior producer Khader berates a programmer for having arranged a satellite interview with an American left-wing academic: "He's just a crazy activist. He wasn't an analyst. He was just against America." Khader's response to the murder of Al-Jazeera journalist Tarek Ayyound by the American military is: "This was punishment—we cannot compete with the US so we just shut up."

Khader observes that "we [Al-Jazeera] don't want to alienate the Americans ... we are what they want for the region—an Arab channel with western mentality." Toward the end of the film he explains to the camera, going out of his way to name the most right-wing, anti-Arab network, "Between us, if I'm offered a job at Fox, I will take it—to change the Arab nightmare into an American Dream."

Control Room reveals that Al-Jazeera's staff, at least in April 2003, clearly believed in the invincibility of the US military. Khader could not have been more wrong when he asserts, "History tells us human beings have short memories. History is written by the victors. People like victory. They don't like justifications. Once you are victorious that is it!" The short-sighted Khader apparently could not envision the Iraqi people successfully resisting colonial occupation.

In its own preoccupation with "balance," *Control Room* is on the whole a passive and relatively timid presentation of the counterweight provided by Al-Jazeera to the US government's depraved media-manipulation of the war against Iraq.

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