

Nov 04, 2016 by **Shawn Powers**

## **When Will We Learn?** <sup>[1]</sup>

Consistent criticism by Arab and Western governments, far from damaging al-Jazeera, has perhaps served as the channel's most effective public relations. Accusations of the news organizations' intent to thwart everything from the American-led War on Terror to the stability of several key Arab regimes has not only drawn increased attention to the channel, but also inspired renewed vigor in al-Jazeera's coverage of issues and controversies sensitive to today's geopolitical players. After all, if every government openly criticizes the channel, than whom else can al-Jazeera represent than its 50 million loyal viewers?

American efforts to discredit the organization, exemplified by Donald Rumsfeld's repeated claims of al-Jazeera's heavy-handed anti-American agenda, are often aired by al-Jazeera itself. Rumsfeld's criticisms not only fail to resonate on the Arab street, where most people believe that anti-Americanism is the fault of American policy, but it also placed the United States policy further at odds with the widely popular news organization. This has made it exceedingly difficult for moderates and an otherwise undecided Arab citizenry to side with even the best of intentioned and implemented American policy.

Israel is falling into a similar trap. Over the last week, Israel has repeatedly detained al-Jazeera journalists accusing them of collusion with Hezbollah while allowing Israeli-operated news organizations nearly unfettered access. According to Israel's Channel 1's Bar Shalom, "the [authorities] suspect them immediately. They never suspect me."

Faced with open hostility in much of the Arab world, Israel should be careful of engaging in any activities that enhance the already rife perception that it is engaging in information control and/or a propaganda campaign against Hezbollah. Regardless of the truthfulness of their accusation, many in the Arab world will hear of the detainment of al-Jazeera crews as a reason to discredit any and all information they receive from Israeli sources about the conflict. Denying al-Jazeera access to the recently attacked Israeli facilities denies the news organization the ability to show the damage that is being done to the Israeli people and infrastructure, important components of Israel's public justification for its attacks in Lebanon. In other words, attempts by Israel to contain the channel will only amplify its credibility both in the region and beyond.

Israel should remember that the ways that media platforms frame violent and controversial events has tremendous consequence not only for swaying public opinion, but also for the ways in which political and military actors frame their hard power responses. The perception that the Israeli government is censoring the opposing frame can only heighten its credibility.

The media war and the physical war are inextricably intertwined. History is filled with examples of cases in which victories on screen have had important implications for tactical decisions off screen. While this is surely why al-Jazeera crews were likely not allowed equal access to Haifa, the result of these actions could be the wholesale discrediting of Israeli coverage of all attacks within its territory, a strategic loss in the information-driven media

battle that Israel cannot afford to lose.

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