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Debate over Al Jazeera's Role in Terrorism, Kidnapping Takes a New Turn [1]

When I was new to Washington and interviewing for a job way back when, I asked a friend on the Hill to be a reference.

"Sure," he said. "I'll be for you or against you, whichever does you the most good."

It was an attempt at humor, of course, but humor is often a spoof on reality.

For example, when the Nixon administration complained about Dan Rather's reporting to his bosses at CBS News, Rather's career took off. He was controversial and high profile, a newsmaker himself, and a good candidate for news anchor to generate ratings and advertising dollars.

And when former Secretary of State Colin Powell took the Arab news channel al-Jazeera to task before its benefactor, the tiny Middle East state of Qatar, his action probably helped to raise the pan-Arab channel's profile and reinforced its appeal among anti-U.S. viewers. On the other hand, if news reports had contained complimentary remarks by Secretary Powell about al-Jazeera, this could have given TV viewers in the Middle East something very different to consider, as they decided which channel to watch.

How to counter al-Jazeera's influential voice in the Middle East has been a continuing problem for the U.S. government and a huge challenge for its public diplomacy practitioners. There is ample evidence that terrorists use al-Jazeera as a potent tool, along with the Internet, to reach publics in the Middle East and around the world.

Consider one example: On August 20, 2004, two French newsmen in Iraq were kidnapped as they traveled along a road on their way to cover a story. They were held captive for four months by a terrorist group that demanded that the French government rescind its ban on head scarves for Muslims in classrooms. The tense drama played out to the public on al-Jazeera, which distributed the terrorists' video to news agencies around the world.

One of the French captives, Christian Chesnot, a freelance reporter for Radio France and Radio France International, spoke about his experience to his radio colleagues at last month's meeting of the European Broadcasting Union, an account provided to me by the EBU's Morand Fachot. He said that the kidnappers, the Islamic Army in Iraq, always kept their faces masked, and stayed informed by watching pan-Arab channels, and possibly by sympathizers abroad. Neither captive had access to media in during the 124 days they were held, except for a single magazine in Arabic, which Chesnot translated for his fellow captive, George Malbrunot, a journalist with Le Figaro.

According to Chesnot, their captors had "a coherent political discourse" and were apparently exploiting him and Malbrunot skillfully. He said their abductors would have probably killed

them if it had served their purpose. But meanwhile, another hostage, Italian journalist and advertising executive Enzo Baldoni, was beheaded.

Malbrunot told Calmann-Levy, which is publishing a book with Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot, entitled "Memories of Hostages: our Counter-Enquiry," that his captors "used the media and the Internet very professionally."

"We did not see the computers," Malbrunot said, "but the person who interrogated us…introduced himself as a computer engineer. He spoke good English and had experience of the new technologies. He had probably typed our names into Google."

One of the captors insisted on giving his hostages several one hundred dollar bills for their laptop computers and mobile phones taken when they were apprehended. They were assumed to be Americans who would be killed, but the terrorists now insisted on paying for the confiscated property, emphasizing that they were not thieves.

"We give you money, but we kill you after," said a terrorist guard, Malbrunot told Le Figaro.

Their captors videotaped Chesnot and Malbrunot 10 days after their capture and then monitored al-Jazeera, to whom they provided the video, and other Arab TV channels, and the terrorists had a team on computers scanning the Internet.

"We saw how keenly our kidnappers awaited France's reaction to the cassette," Malbrunot told Calman-Levy, especially watching reaction from the captives' home in France.

"They had the impression they had made themselves heard, thanks to the media," said Malbrunot. "Our capturers monitored the impact of the incident from day to day. They were fully abreast of everything that was happening in France, in real time."

The French government became frantic, enlisting everything from a personal appeal to the terrorists from President Jacques Chirac, to intervention from French secret agents and services from a Middle East expert who had helped capture the infamous Venezuelan terrorist Carlos the Jackal in the Sudan.

Reporters without Borders, an organization that fights for freedom of the press appealed to the Arab media to provide "the widest publicity" to the kidnappings. Support also came from the Paris-based World Association of Newspapers, which claims to represent 18,000 newspapers in 106 countries.

On August 30, 2004, when terrorists made their video of Chesnot and Malbrunot available to Al-Jazeera, terrorists who captured them were monitoring the Arab satellite channel and the internet. The tape was played, and Al Jazeers also carried condemnations of the action from individuals and groups across the Arab World.

And the Committee to Protect Journalists also called for their release, citing protests "from political figures, religious groups, professional associations, and political organizations across the Arab world. They included popular Muslim religious figure Sheikh Youssef Qaradawi, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Arab League head Amr Musa, Lebanese cleric Mohammed Husayn Fadlallah, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization, Hamas, and various local press organizations and politicians."

Chesnot said the fact that he and Malbrunot were French, and that France opposed the war, mobilized many Arab governments on their behalf and probably saved their lives.

He also said that the immediate response and appeals from media organizations and bodies - which gave credence to the fact that they were journalists, not spies - also helped, so did continuous campaigning on the part of the media for their release.

Malbrunot agreed that the outpouring of media support helped to free him and Chesnot. But he believed that the terrorists had already achieved their objectives.

"They were able to have talks over four months with a country that is a permanent member of the Security Council," Malbrunot told Calman-Levy. "It enabled them to make themselves known."

There is a two-fold motivation for terrorists to use the media, according to Professor Arie Kruglanski, Co-Director, National Center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism, at the University of Maryland.

"The very logic of their action is the instilment of fear," he said. "They need people to know of their heinous acts, and the media serve that purpose. Terrorists act on the Chinese dictum 'kill one man frighten a thousand', or in the present case many millions. This can have a profound effect on the economy and in some cases on major political developments, such as the change of government in Spain. Terrorists also want to attract attention to themselves as superstars and heroes, a motivation to becoming a martyr."

But what of al-Jazeera's role: is it reporting the news, or is it helping to make the news?

Dorrance Smith, a longtime ABC News producer - and former senior media adviser to ambassador Paul Bremer in Iraq - said the U.S. should not stand idly by as more and more hostages are taken in Iraq and videos of them are shown on al-Jazeera and the American networks.

Writing in the Wall Street Journal, Smith said "the collaboration between the terrorists and al-Jazeera is stronger than ever." He asked whether al-Jazeera was paying for the hostage videos, whether it knows the whereabouts of the terrorists and keeps it secret, and whether the channel is "promised safety and protection" if it uses the videos.

Smith noted that "No al-Jazeera employee has been killed or taken hostage by the terrorists." However, that when he ran the Iraqi television network, Smith said "seven employees were killed by terrorists."

Smith also said that al-Jazeera has "very strong partners in the U.S. - ABC, NBC, Fox, CNN and MSNBC."

"Video aired by al-Jazeera ends up on these networks, sometimes within minutes," he said, suggesting that the American networks should consider not airing terrorist videos.

"At the very least," asked Smith, "is it not reasonable to raise questions about the sources and methods used to obtain this material?"

Professor Kruglanski agrees that Al Jazeera is probably cooperating with the terrorists.

"Al Jazeera clearly has a special relation with them, and quite possibly is promising to keep its sources secret, and to portray stories in ways that are sympathetic to the terrorists," he told me. "In addition to assuring terrorist scoops, this is also good business because the audiences of Al Jazeera in Arab countries are often quite sympathetic to terrorists, and like to see their point of view represented sympathetically, which increases the viewership of Al Jazeera."

Professor Kruglanski also emphasized the downside of any U.S. government effort to put the arm on Qatar, to cut its funding of al-Jazeera.

"To impose limitations on Al Jazeera, as Smith suggests, by pressing Qatar to withdraw its funding, etc. has to be carefully considered in terms of its pros and cons. Like with many other responses to terrorism, there is a dilemma here. The closing of a media outlet could be portrayed as censorship and an antidemocratic policy that reveals American hypocrisy. Acting forcefully against Al Jazeera and other media that directly or indirectly aid and abet terrorists, has to be weighed for its pluses (undermining the terrorists channel to publics they seek to impress), and its minuses (feeding anti-Americanism in the Arab and the Moslem worlds as well, perhaps, as in Europe)."

Not everything has been going al-Jazeera's way recently, as noted here. The cable news channel is running a poor second in the TV ratings in Iraq, well behind al-Iraqiya, the government's station. Al-Jazeera is but one of hundreds of satellite channels competing for ratings in the Middle East, and the controversial channel is about to be sold to new bosses who may want to cut the station's $100 million annual budget. The channel is persona non grata in Saudi Arabia, whose leaders have effectively dissuaded sponsors from buying commercial spots on the channel, contributing to the station's uninterrupted flow of red ink.

And more bad news for al-Jazeera: A couple of weeks ago the Iranian government closed al-Jazeera's Tehran news bureau, accusing the channel of fomenting ethnic unrest in which some 200 protestors were arrested. Iran is considering expelling al Jazeera from the country, citing ties to the demonstrators. Al Jazeera claims it is covering the story of anti-government protestors objectively.

And recent comments about al-Jazeera cannot be going down well with the channel's anti-American viewers. Nice things were being said about the channel's news coverage, but the person who said it was all wrong for al-Jazeera, and it could very well hurt rather than help.

Richard Perle, a former senior Pentagon official and a very vocal critic of al-Jazeera, said he now believes the channel's coverage of the Iraq elections and anti-Syrian demonstrations in Lebanon sent a powerful message about the spread of democratic values in the Middle East.

Too bad for al-Jazeera that Richard Perle didn't ask the channel if it wanted him to be for or against it.