

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Reading Right to Left ^[1]

Doha, Qatar

Coming through customs at Doha International Airport you pass a billboard for this micro-state's most famous export: the Al-Jazeera satellite news channel. Its headline:

.view of point different A

The three main Arabic-language news channels took radically different approaches to Thursday's (actually, over here, early Friday's) presidential debate. In the half-hour before the debate began Al-Hurra ran a documentary on the history of political debates in the United States, starting with Lincoln-Douglas. It left actual anchoring duties to a man and woman with the bubbly effusiveness of morning show hosts, sitting on a dark lawn. They, at least, appeared to be in Florida. Al-Arabiya's anchor was planted in, of all places, Times Square where, after the debate, he was joined for analysis by Dr. Amani Jamal, a Princeton professor who wears the Islamic headscarf.

Al-Jazeera's approach was by far the most interesting. The network gathered around 100 Arab-Americans in a Miami studio to debate the issues before the candidates began, and to critique Bush and Kerry's performance afterwards. The channel's editor-in-chief, Ahmed Sheikh, told me the group was specifically selected to include Republicans, Democrats and Independents, and yet "there was sort of agreement that the policy of the present administration was not fair toward Arab causes."

Supporters of both candidates found the answer to this problem within their man. Kerry backers "had a glimpse of hope that the next administration might change its present policies of total bias toward Israel, and change its course in Iraq," Sheikh says. He found Bush supporters hoping for basically the same thing, but believing it more likely from a second term president freed from the burden of further election campaigns.

None of this particularly surprised Sheikh, a Palestinian who has worked for Al-Jazeera for all but a year of the channel's eight year existence and who took over as chief editor six months ago. Asked for his own analysis he said: "I think that John Kerry just hit the very heart of the truth when he said it was a 'colossal error of judgment' – the war itself, the invasion itself, because we are all suffering. The whole region is suffering because of it."

Al-Jazeera is often (and often ignorantly) criticized in the US for its coverage of Iraq, but its work on this year's American political campaigns has been exemplary. As one executive pointed out to me today, Al-Jazeera devoted far more hours to the party conventions than any American broadcast network and made a real effort to explain the process to its viewers.

By far the best known news network in the Middle East, it has ambitious expansion plans. There is already an Al-Jazeera sports channel. Al-Jazeera Kids goes on the air in March. A

short walk from Sheikh's office a huge new newsroom is under construction. When it is finished and the staff moves in, the current newsroom will be turned over to Al-Jazeera's new English-language channel, expected to go on the air at the end of next year. That will definitely be something worth watching. In the increasingly corporate and homogeneous world of American TV news, a view of point different a could be a breath of much needed fresh air.
