

The Arab TV Wars

By Daoud Kuttab

Day 1, Amman, Jordan

Although President Bush's ultimatum to President Hussein ended after midnight last night, I was sure that the war would not start for a few days. My wife's parents are staying with us this week because they are worried about the war, and when I got up this morning, they told me that missiles had already hit Baghdad. I turned on the TV and watched CNN for a bit, then flipped over to Al Jazeera. The Iraqi information minister, Muhammad Said al-Sahaf, was on, and he was in the middle of introducing Saddam Hussein.

The next image was a live feed from Iraqi television, with the Iraqi emblem in the top left corner and a seated Saddam Hussein with large glasses on in the center of the frame. Seconds later the TV screen went blank. I immediately thought that the Americans were trying to jam the broadcast. But after a few seconds it was on again, this time bearing the logo of Iraqi Youth TV (which is run by Saddam's oldest son, Uday). A pale-faced Saddam, clearly exhausted, spoke defiantly from a prepared text. My father-in-law, who takes the Arabic language very seriously, said that the speech was full of attempts at poetic flourishes, but that Saddam was reading some of them wrong, stressing the wrong syllables. He must not have had time to practice.

Day 2, Amman

The human element of this war became much clearer this morning when we woke up to video on Al Jazeera of Iraqis injured in the attack on Baghdad. Al Jazeera is the most-watched Arab satellite station, partly because its journalism is highly professional and partly because viewers like the fact that its reporters and anchors give the news a pro-Arab spin. The station was established in 1996 with money from the emir of Qatar and now has a highly skilled staff of Arab journalists, many of whom made their careers working for the BBC and other respected European broadcasters. Almost every Arab government gets upset with Al Jazeera, because it doesn't toe the party line the way the various national networks do. Al Jazeera will juxtapose government spokesmen with antigovernment opponents. The fact that the Americans got so furious at Al Jazeera for showing the bin Laden tapes only increased the network's popularity and credibility among Arabs.

As I ate my breakfast, I switched back and forth between the West and the East. CNN, Sky and the BBC were saying that the Fao peninsula and Umm Qasr had fallen to the U.S. coalition troops. But the Arab satellite stations were running reports, quoting Iraqi officials, denying those coalition claims. In a live press conference, the Iraqi minister of information and the Iraqi minister of the interior questioned the authenticity of the video images of Iraqi soldiers surrendering. The Iraqi officials seemed to be losing their composure, calling the Americans "infidel colonialists" and "uncouth bloodsuckers" and saying that since the invaders were not respecting international law, then the Iraqis would not be bound by international treaties in dealing with prisoners of war.

In the evening, King Abdullah went on Jordan TV, which is a state-run broadcast channel. He was trying to express his understanding of the public anger regarding the war, while not alienating his friends in the U.S. government. "I know the pain and anger you are feeling because of the suffering and ordeal that the Iraqi people are facing," he intoned. "I am one of

you. I share the feelings of every one of you, and my confidence in you and your awareness has no limits." But he asked his subjects to be restrained in their protests. "As for the demonstration of our feelings toward the brotherly Iraqi people, it has to be expressed in a civilized manner that will help to ease the anguish of our brothers."

Day 3, Amman

My father-in-law turned on Al Jazeera early this morning, and the first thing I saw was a roundup of the world media, which included a report from The New York Times about the surrender of an entire Iraqi division. The next item was from the gulf daily newspaper Al Bayan, which reported that an interim government was going to be set up in Basra by the Americans and British and that one of the first decisions of this interim government was going to be the recognition of Israel. The Iraqi interior minister gave another briefing, in which he insisted that the invaders had suffered major losses. He said that resisting forces, made up of Baath activists and local Bedouins, had destroyed five U.S. tanks in the south Iraqi desert.

I got the newspapers when I arrived at work. The independent Jordanian daily Al Arab Al Yawm led with the big headline "Barbaric Shelling Lights Up Baghdad's Night."

In the evening, when I got back home, I heard that Al Jazeera had been running stark images all day of some of the Iraqi civilian casualties from Basra. I switched to the brand-new Saudi-owned 24-hour news channel Al Arabiya, whose correspondents talked about an Egyptian family of 11 (including 4 children) that was killed at the outskirts of Basra. The television station used the term "shaheed," which means "martyr," to describe anyone killed by the American-led forces. I was surprised that Al Arabiya would use that language; I didn't think its Saudi backers were great fans of Saddam. The station was started just a couple of months ago by the Middle East Broadcasting Center, which has had a lot of success with an Arabic version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

Day 4, Amman

The first thing I noticed when I turned on the television this morning was a reference to Americans using "Israeli tactics." This was on the Lebanese station Al Manar, which is very popular with Palestinians and other Arabs for broadcasting news from Palestine and the speeches of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah. While generally opposed to the war, this station has had interesting alternative opinions that hint at the need for change in Iraq -- not by means of a foreign invasion but rather by a collective Arab resolve, based on closer relations between Arab leaders and their people.

I flipped over to Al Jazeera, where an item on the crawl at the bottom of the screen said that the shell of an Israeli-made missile had been recovered in the latest attack on Baghdad.

On my way to work, I stopped by a local money-changer, and as I was leaving, my cellphone gave a special jingle. I subscribe to a news messaging service connected to the news service Agence France-Presse. The brief message on my phone read, "Four Jordanian students were killed when their car was hit by a U.S. coalition missile near Mosul in northern Iraq." I expected that today would be a difficult one in Amman. Bader Al Agha, the university student who reads the news at AmmanNet, the Internet radio station I run, told me yesterday that student demonstrations were expected today. This news will no doubt add to their anger.

When I got home, the TV broadcasts were shocking. Footage of a large number of Iraqi civilians searching for an American pilot who was said to have parachuted after his plane ran

into trouble. Then on to a press briefing by Taha Yassin Ramadan, the Iraqi vice president, who the Americans had said was killed in the first night's attack. He was defiant, blasting away at Kofi Annan for pulling the U.N. inspectors out. He denied that even a single Iraqi town had fallen and also said that American soldiers had been captured. Video of them would soon be provided to the media, he promised.

Sure enough, a few minutes later Al Jazeera began showing footage taken by an Iraqi TV crew. The scenes were so bloody we had to quickly take our 3 1/2-year-old daughter, Dina, away. After the scenes of the killed marines, we were then shown the P. O.W.'s. The first one looked literally scared to death. Even Salam, my wife, who has been so angry with the Americans for starting this war, said she felt sorry for them.

By 8 p.m., we couldn't take it any longer. Salam insisted that we turn the television off and said that we could turn it back on only if we could find a nice film, preferably a comedy.

Day 5, Amman

I was supposed to go to the West Bank town Ramallah this morning, but under intense pressure from my wife, who was worried that traveling would be too dangerous, I decided to stay in Amman for another day. Iraqi state television announced this morning that "an important and historic speech" by Saddam Hussein would soon be broadcast. Patriotic songs played. Under the title "The Decisive Battle," an Iraqi official in a military uniform appeared on the screen between songs to announce that the speech was about to begin. Saddam, when he finally appeared, seemed much more composed than he did on the first day of the war.

An Egyptian military expert on Al Jazeera said that the speech proved that the "barrier of fear" had been broken and that we as Arabs had learned that we can say no to the Americans. In an interview, the Iraqi foreign minister, Naji Sabri, said that an unexploded Israeli missile had been discovered near Baghdad, which he said proved without a doubt the involvement of the Israelis. The text ticker reported that fighting was continuing in Umm Qasr, and it kept repeating that the American director Michael Moore had expressed opposition to the war at the Academy Awards. I had no idea who Michael Moore was, but now I knew that he was against the war.

I flipped over to Al Manar, the Lebanese station, where they were reporting on Umm Qasr. A retired Lebanese army general said proudly that no one expected a small port in southern Iraq to resist the Americans for five days.

When I got to work, everyone at the station was poring over the newspapers. All the Jordanian papers carried photos of the American P.O.W.'s on their front pages. "A Field Day of Losses for the American and British Troops," read a huge headline across the entire front page of Al Arab Al Yawm. "Fierce Battle and Tough Resistance Throughout Iraq," read an eight-column headline in the largest daily, Al Rai.

Since I was leaving for Palestine the following morning, I decided to take my wife out to dinner. In the car, we turned on Radio Sawa, which is financed by the American government. Sawa is a newly packaged version of the Voice of America that has been winning over young Arabs in the last year or so with an entertaining mix of Arab and Western pop music, broken up with extremely brief nuggets of headline news. Since the start of the war, though, Sawa has been running a lot more detailed news -- focusing on the American point of view -- including live coverage of all the major U.S. military briefings, with simultaneous translation into Arabic. As we drove, we listened to Gen. Tommy R. Franks, who was boasting that the campaign's progress was "rapid, and in some cases dramatic."

Day 6, Amman to East Jerusalem

When I woke up, I turned on Abu Dhabi TV, and the first images I saw were pictures from a hospital, children with casts and bandages on their heads. Abu Dhabi TV is another attempt to emulate the success of Al Jazeera -- and to steal its audience. Most of the new channels are backed by one sheik or another as an antidote, or at least an alternative, to Al Jazeera's populism. The rulers of the United Arab Emirate of Abu Dhabi have a vast amount of oil money, and they've been spending some of it on Abu Dhabi TV, which uses state-of-the-art technology to produce broadcasts that at least seem independent.

I set out for Ramallah. The only way to get there from Amman is by public transportation -- service taxi, which means a shared taxi. The taxi drivers tend to listen to one of two radio stations -- the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), broadcasting from London over an FM repeater station in Amman, or the Arabic service of the BBC. My driver was listening to the MBC announcer, who was talking about the meeting of Arab League foreign ministers in Cairo. The meeting had just ended with a statement resolving to go to the U.N. Security Council to put a stop to the U.S. invasion. A commentator on MBC ridiculed the resolution, saying that before going to the Security Council the Arabs should put their own house in order, considering that five member countries were giving logistical support to the coalition forces.

When we got to Ramallah, I picked up a few Palestinian newspapers. They were full of boasts about the holdouts in Umm Qasr and Nasiriya. They seemed to be trying to create a mythology around what they considered to be heroic Iraqi resistance. There was a four-column photo in Al Quds, the most popular Palestinian newspaper, showing a downed American helicopter and the farmer who, according to the caption, had shot it down.

In the evening, we were delayed at a checkpoint outside Bethlehem. I tuned in to the Arabic service of the BBC, which was reporting that a popular uprising against Saddam had begun in Basra. When I finally got through the checkpoint and made it to a friend's house, we switched on Fox News, where a reporter was repeating the same story about the uprising.

When I arrived at last in East Jerusalem, I tuned in to Al Jazeera, which broadcast a phone interview with the Iraqi minister of information, who was vehemently denying the story about the Basra uprising. "I officially deny the lies that the Americans and British are trying to propagate using CNN and other stations," he said. Al Jazeera turned next to its reporter in Basra, who also refuted the claim, saying that he had not seen or heard anything unusual except for a large explosion at about 5 p.m.

Day 7, East Jerusalem

My first images this morning came from CNN, which has been running and rerunning a positive story (from the coalition's point of view) showing British troops mingling freely with Iraqis in Umm Qasr. Over on Al Jazeera, they were playing a message from Saddam, read by the minister of information, encouraging his people to fight on, promising them that if they continue fighting, the invaders will withdraw. To its credit, Al Jazeera followed this with a clip from President Bush saying: "We cannot know the duration of the war. Yet we know its outcome; we will prevail. . . . Our world will be more secure and peaceful."

When I watch CNN and ABC and MSNBC (I have to pay extra to get American stations), I notice that a lot of their reports are from "embedded" reporters. Al Jazeera also has a correspondent embedded with the coalition troops, but just one: Amr Kahki, who was reporting

today from Umm Qasr. He interviewed British military leaders who said that they are working on "building relations" with the Iraqi population in the village. And he interviewed local leaders who said that they were "confused," and weren't sure exactly what their legal status was. Amr Kahki is good, but he's not the real media star of the war -- that's Majed Abdel Hadi, a Palestinian reporter for Al Jazeera who is in Baghdad, seen daily (and nightly) reporting on the shelling. He was famous even before the war because of his dispatches from Tora Bora during the war in Afghanistan.

Al Jazeera seemed like an all-American network today. First President Bush was shown giving a speech, and then Colin Powell came on to give an exclusive interview to the anchor, Adnan Sharif, a stocky man who used to work for Jordanian TV. Powell told the Arab television audience that the U.S. wanted this war to end as soon as possible and that American forces have been doing their best to minimize Iraqi civilian casualties. Despite the fact that Al Jazeera's economic correspondent was just kicked off the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, officials in Washington have been lining up to get on the network.

Day 8, East Jerusalem

Fadi Abu Saada, the young and charismatic anchor at Radio Bethlehem, said that at the U.N. Security Council, several speakers mentioned the connections between Palestine and Iraq. One ambassador, he said, referred to "the occupation of Iraq and Palestine." The sandstorm in Baghdad and yesterday's hard-fought battles were also on the news, with Iraqis describing them as "heavenly intervention."

A question of terminology has been a subject of heated debate around the AmmanNet office in recent days -- whether to refer to the situation in Iraq as an invasion or a war. Arab television stations tend to use the term "invasion" as part of their regular war logo. Al Jazeera uses the logo "War on Iraq" (and not war in Iraq). The Lebanese Hezbollah station Al Manar uses the phrase "Invasion of Iraq"; the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation uses "Iraq in the Middle of the Storm." And the Saudi station Al Arabiya uses a more neutral phrase: "The Third Gulf War." (The Iraqi war against Iran was the first; the war following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was the second.)

Day 9, East Jerusalem

Fridays are usually protest days in the Arab and Muslim world. This morning, Abu Dhabi TV ran a report about public anger in Egypt, focusing on the fact that the Egyptian government has banned all street demonstrations. Then came a long report from New York showing many images of the antiwar demonstrations outside Rockefeller Center and near New York University. A report from Tehran said that many Iranians are coming to the Iraqi Embassy there, volunteering to join the Iraqi resistance.

Another interesting question of terminology today. Al Arabiya TV reported on the 116 Iraqis killed in Basra without using the term "shaheed" (or "martyr"), which they used in the first days of the war.

The human cost of war was evident all over television today. On ABC, Diane Sawyer was taping a "video postcard" of family and friends wishing speedy recovery to an injured soldier, while on Abu Dhabi TV, a reporter was interviewing Iraqis fleeing from the battle near Nasiriya. A well-dressed man with a red kaffiyeh was walking quickly and telling the reporter, "Water, water, that is what we need." A woman dressed in black was criticizing the American

and British forces and calling on Arabs to help. A woman carrying a baby said, "We just want peace."

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