

By Nehad Ismail. UK based writer/broadcaster and commentator on Middle Eastern Affairs

Al Jazeera with some help from NATO has succeeded in bringing down the Gaddafi clan that ruled Libya for 42 years with an amalgamation of fear, death squads, assassinations, unexplained disappearances of opponents, torture and fear. The next mission for Al Jazeera is the toppling of the Syrian tyrant Bashar al Assad. This regime is equally blood thirsty but is more cunning and calculating than the former Libyan regime.

I must confess that up to a year or so ago I had been somewhat uneasy about some of the Al Jazeera Arabic output. This has now changed. I am now an ardent admirer of the Station's honourable stance in taking the side of the people against the dictators in such an unambiguous and decisive manner.

Al Jazeera has been criticised for many reasons. One is lack of impartiality and objectivity in covering the unfolding events in Syria and Libya. I argue that this is not the case. For a start, Libya and Syria prevented Al Jazeera's teams from doing their job in covering the mass protests against their dictatorial regimes. Despite that, the Channel has given plenty of space for the pro-regime spokespersons and defenders to have their say and peddle their lies. There have been two resignations at Al Jazeera in protest at the presumed biased coverage of the uprisings in Syria and Libya. The Channel has not been shaken by the departure of the two disgruntled broadcasters and continued with its mission to bring down the tyrants of Tripoli and Damascus.

This is not to say that other Channels notably Al Jazeera English, Al Arabiya and BBC Arabic are not doing a sterling job. Their coverage of the uprising has been of the highest professional standards, but less strident and more restrained than Al Jazeera Arabic. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya have played a pivotal role in the popular Arab uprisings. Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were described as contemptible dogs by Gaddafi and Bashar al Assad.

Since it came into existence in 1996 Al Jazeera Arabic Satellite Channel has played a critical role in shaping public opinion in the Middle East, not only educating and informing but also provoking controversy and opening up debate on issues considered taboo prior to the era of Al Jazeera. It had successfully rumbled the dictators and shaken the regimes. Most Arab dictators have singled out Al Jazeera as the most dangerous enemy. Its broadcast were blocked, offices trashed and its correspondents black-listed or even arrested and harassed.

The advent of Al Jazeera was like a media earthquake that opened up the gates of freedom of expression and democracy. The clash of opposing views, criticism of governments and rulers were welcomed by audiences throughout the Arab world. It has succeeded in winning opinions as well hearts and minds. Al Jazeera was the first Arabic Channel to invite Israeli politicians and commentators to express their views on political issues during news bulletins and live-shows.

Recently the Station has been beaming visceral videos of horrific scenes of the injured and dying in Syria. This kind of material is deemed too gruesome to be shown on the BBC, Sky or Channel 4.

There were accusations that Al Jazeera was not following events but its coverage was "cheerleading" events, instigating and mobilising public opinion against the Syrian and Libyan tyrants. Al Jazeera has pushed the Arab youth into the Street to demonstrate and demand the fall of the absolute tyrants. Al Jazeera made full use of the social media and accepted feeds from individual protesters who took footage on their mobile phones, Twitter feeds and Face book postings. It has mobilized the crowds and encouraged them to rise up against the tyrants ruling over them.

Waddah Khanfar, the Director General of Al Jazeera News Channel defended the Station's coverage during an interview he gave to the "Listening Post" programme last May. Khanfar explained that the Station strives to be fair and accurate and at the same time to ensure that the voice of the

people is heard. Credibility is important to Al Jazeera Khanfar said. He also rejected the accusation that the coverage of the Bahrain protest was unbalanced. He also rejected the accusation that Al Jazeera fuelled the protests. It merely allowed the voices of the people to be heard by integrating the social media with the main stream news gathering methods, he explained. Its coverage has been instrumental in the toppling of the Tunisian President Zein al-Abedin Ben Ali, the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. The Syrian tyrant Bashar Al Assad is next. If Al Jazeera takes the side of the people you can bet your bottom dollar that the dictator is doomed. The Channel provided extensive coverage of the peaceful protests in Syria and the harsh military crackdown against the civilians by the regime security forces. It reported and analyzed the naval bombardment of residential areas in Latakia.

Some even complained that Al Jazeera is a Foreign Policy tool in the hands of the Qatari government. Officially Qatar denied this but no one can deny that Al Jazeera has enhanced the image of Qatar globally and within the Arab world. Generously funded by the government of Qatar, it has done a great job in promoting the concepts of freedom of speech and democracy in the Middle East.

It has put Qatar on the map. It has given Qatar more influence and clout than is justified by its size.

Critics keep saying that Al Jazeera never focused on local issues and never criticized the regime. This is unfair and untrue. I have seen live discussion programmes in which studio guests expressed disapproval of Qatar for hosting an American military base s at Al Udeid. It invited guests who accused the Station of being a Zionist agent. Phone-in callers said all sort of nasty things about Al Jazeera and Qatar during uncensored live transmission. According to Hugh Miles's book Al Jazeera "How Arab TV News Challenged the World" the Qatari Emir was criticised for meeting the Israeli Prime Minister at the UN Millennium Summit and for allowing the Israeli Trade Office to remain open in Doha.

The coverage of the Arab Spring has been effective, comprehensive and professional. I heard comments that Al Jazeera Arabic is less objective than the more restrained Al Jazeera English. I don't see how you could be objective when you see the Syrian regime deploy gun-boats to shell residential areas, or when you see tanks firing at apartment blocks. Al Jazeera's professional and dedicated coverage unified the Arab Street under the banner of the Arab Spring Tsunami that is sweeping the region. Three dictators down, the two more to go are Bashar al Assad the tyrant of Syria and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen. To appreciate how good Al Jazeera is, all you have to do is to take a look at the mediocre Libyan and Syrian State Channels and one or two Stations which are Syrian owned and operated from London.

The Arab Spring would not have been possible without Al Jazeera.

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