

8 A (More) Humanitarian Take Al Jazeera English and Arabic Coverage of Immigration in the West

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With negative attitudes toward immigration rising in nearly all segments of the population in both the United States and the European Union,¹ it is perhaps not surprising that numerous studies, including new research in the previous chapters, indicate that the news media in these countries can play an important role in making immigration a more salient issue and, often, in fomenting and perpetuating anti-immigrant attitude by emphasizing the illegal elements of immigration, engaging in the use of stereotypes, and focusing on individual cases while ignoring the larger structural forces at work.² The international media landscape of the 21st century, however, is being reshaped by a rise of the rest—the Doha-based Al Jazeera networks, both Arabic and English, are an increasingly crucial player in the global flow of news.

In addition to its rising prominence and legitimacy, Al Jazeera lends considerable attention to immigration in both Europe and the United States, especially from the perspective of “sending” countries in North Africa, making it an important voice in the debate. This chapter examines coverage of immigration in Italy and the United States by Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) and Al Jazeera English (AJE), with a particular emphasis on discursive differences across the Atlantic and between the channels. Relative to the Western news media discussed in previous chapters, this study also highlights Al Jazeera’s unique spin on immigration as an alternative model of journalistic practice.

A NEW INTERNATIONAL VOICE

Both AJA and AJE are becoming increasingly influential international news sources,³ especially among Middle Eastern opinion leaders,⁴ and are seen as more credible than comparable organizations like CNN and the BBC by their millions of viewers in both the East and the West.⁵ Al Jazeera was created in 1996 as an Arabic-language independent news network that communicated issues relevant to the Arab world to a pan-Arab audience; 10 years later, the editorially independent AJE was launched

to reach worldwide audiences.⁶ Through the adoption of Western journalistic norms and techniques,⁷ stressing values such as fairness, balance, and the presentation of multiple points of view,⁸ Al Jazeera has gained substantial credibility both in the Middle East and abroad.⁹ According to Nisbet et al., Al Jazeera and other emerging pan-Arab television news stations are becoming increasingly powerful communication channels within the Muslim world.¹⁰ Indeed, in their study of media influences on perceptions of the United States, Nisbet et al. found that individuals turning to pan-Arab regional networks like Al Jazeera were more likely to hold more negative perceptions of the United States than those who turned to Western networks like CNN or the BBC, though others found that political identification may serve as a moderator of Al Jazeera's influence on public opinion.¹¹ Furthermore, these effects may be even more powerful in light of two-step theories of opinion formation, with Al Jazeera serving as a key source of information for opinion leaders.¹²

While researchers and media analysts often fail to distinguish between Al Jazeera's English- and Arabic-language channels,¹³ we argue that important distinctions exist in their coverage, especially given the distinct audiences. Studies suggest that the vast majority of visitors to AJE's website come from Western countries, while AJA's Arabic website is visited almost exclusively by individuals in Arab countries, and that these individuals have different reasons and motivations for turning to the network.¹⁴

ISSUE COVERAGE BY AL JAZEERA ENGLISH AND AL JAZEERA ARABIC

According to el-Nawawy and Powers, AJE viewers view the broadcaster as more "conciliatory" than CNN International and the BBC, covering contentious issues in a manner that creates an environment more conducive to cooperation and negotiation. They also found that the more viewers watched AJE, the less dogmatic their thinking became, leading to greater tolerance of conflicting antagonists in contentious issues.¹⁵ AJE has been found to be more likely than comparable global outlets to treat groups with unequal power equally in discourse, to place historic elements of stories in new contexts that are easier to understand for modern-day viewers, and to refrain from using scare quotes in its headlines or to overplay the social and discursive context of conflicts.¹⁶ In contrast, Cherribi found that AJA used the conflict over women's wearing of the *niqab* (veil) in France to build a global Muslim identity, mobilize a shared public opinion, and construct a transnational Muslim community, leading him to characterize Al Jazeera as a religious channel with news programming rather than a neutral news channel.¹⁷

Further, in a study of the representation of different countries and regions in AJE and AJA news broadcasts, al-Najjar found that both channels

devoted roughly one-third of their coverage to select countries but that, in the remainder of the coverage, AJA was more likely to feature other Arab nations than AJE, which was more likely to feature European nations and to focus on human rights and protests rather than internal politics.¹⁸ Similarly, Fahmy and Emad found that the online coverage by AJE and AJA of the conflict between the United States and Al Qaeda was very similar but that AJE gave its stories greater emphasis.¹⁹

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

In this study, we focused on a set of comparative questions: Is there any difference between how AJA and AJE covered immigration in the United States? Is there any difference between how AJA and AJE covered immigration in Italy? Is there any difference between how AJA covered immigration in Italy and in the United States? Is there any difference between how AJE covered immigration issues unfolding in Italy and in the United States?

The first author examined all video clips and articles more than two paragraphs in length that were posted on AJA and AJE's websites from January 2010 to April 2012 and that contained the following terms: immigrant OR immigration OR refugee OR refugees AND Italy OR Arizona; انوزيراً ايلاطي! ترجمه رج املا ئجال نوي جاللا. The date range allowed for the sample to include coverage of immigration in the post-9/11 security context, as well before and after the 2011 "Arab Spring." The date range of this sample also includes coverage of immigration in the United States during the recent political debates over Arizona's controversial bill, SB-1070. The search returned a total of 14 video clips and 11 news stories specifically relevant to the issue of immigration. The primary discursive elements sought in sample were depictions of immigrants, political debates and their context, plight/situation of immigrants, push/pull factors, and the responses of receiving countries.

In order to study those discourses and any differences between the two Al Jazeera channels, we relied on the methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which has been used across disciplines to address structural relationships of power created by language, specifically in immigration coverage studies.²⁰ For example, Buonfino found that media discourse on immigration in the European Union was made into a political issue at the nation-state level, with inherent contradictions between the shared ideals of equality and the presentation of immigration as a security threat.²¹ Similarly, Triandafyllidou observed a distinct ingroup-outgroup "othering" of immigrants by citizens of Greece, Italy, and Spain and found that national identity was redefined by citizens when immigration was interpreted as a security concern.²² In our analysis, we focused on Fairclough's third aspect of CDA, centering on power and class relationships as observed through discourse.²³

**AN ALTERNATIVE VOICE ON IMMIGRATION:
AL JAZEERA ENGLISH'S COVERAGE
OF IMMIGRATION IN ITALY**

AJE provided in-depth coverage of immigration in Italy for several months before the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which resulted in the massive influx of North African and sub-Saharan African immigrants into Italy after December 2010, airing several two-minute news segments and featuring print stories online. In a 2010 feature piece titled “The Enemy Within,” direct connections were drawn among immigration, Islamophobia, and debates over multiculturalism in Italy: “Some accuse the [Italian] government of racism and Islamophobia, others believe that immigrants are an enemy within.”²⁴ Here the coverage openly advocates for immigrants by focusing on structural and economic factors such as job shortages, lack of resources in home countries, and conflict, such as the “plight of the immigrants,” as push-pull factors. The attacks of September 11, 2001, are marked as a turning point in Italian views of Islam and Muslims. After 9/11, immigrants were deemed a “security issue” by the state, although the North Africans referenced in the story are specifically described as economic migrants, thereby drawing a contrast between state discourse and the “reality” of immigrants and immigration. The article targets Italian media, focusing on their antagonistic discourse toward Muslim immigrants and their spreading of anxieties about the erosion of Italian culture. As a result, “many Italians are opposed to having mosques in their neighborhoods because they fear extremism, crime, and violence” and because some feel that the presence of mosques “prevents immigrants from integrating fully.” AJE coverage in general appeared to exhibit great anxiety itself over the culture debate taking place in Europe, with immigration serving as a central issue.

AJE stories on immigration in Italy after the outbreak of the Arab Spring continue this trend of being deeply humanistic and focusing on individual immigrants’ stories, while highlighting larger systemic and structural factors. For example, one televised feature shows footage of exhausted-looking sub-Saharan immigrants who were abused in Libya and are scared to return home. In another story aired on AJE a month later that follows the situation of a young Cameroonian worker named Calvin, the reporter states, “These young men are not here by choice. One could say they are casualties of war” (“Future Uncertain for Libyan Refugees in Italy,” 2011). As the story of Calvin’s experience in the refugee camp unfolds, the reporter continues: “Calvin just wants to work and get his life back on track. But his legal status is unclear, so for now he just waits and ponders a future he can’t control.” The camera then cuts to Calvin smoking a cigarette, looking on as refugees are assisted in the camp.

The journey undertaken by immigrants is regularly and repeatedly described as “dangerous” and their sea vessels described in several stories as “rickety.” In the February 2011 piece “Italy Alarm over Tunisian

Migrants,” the reader is told of “hundreds of migrants” who “slept under open skies at Lampedusa’s port, wrapped in space blankets.” In the televised story “Italy Struggles with Tunisia Influx,” boats that are “open to the elements” are “lining up” to land in Lampedusa. Both televised and print stories regularly note the presence of any women and children on such journeys, as the boats that arrive are often carrying only men. Pictures and video footage follow these themes by showing incoming immigrants packed tightly and precariously into boats of various sizes. The worried-looking men and women shown are dressed for cold weather on their journey across the Mediterranean and eager to get on shore.

European governments are regularly and openly criticized, most heavily by sources but also by journalists, for their lack of preparedness and for their resistance to “accepting responsibility” for the immigrants themselves. Trifling politicians are discussed in virtually all of the reporting, very often by critical nongovernmental aid workers. One woman described only as an “aid worker” states, “People have regained their democracy [in Tunisia] with much hardship and difficulty. There are probably many political refugees” (“Italy Struggles with Tunisia Influx,” 2011). One emotional African refugee states that he “worked in Libya for four good years . . . if [the Italian government] can intervene in Libya, then they can take care of me. They can do this for me” (“Libyan Workers Stranded in Italy,” 2011). Italian political leaders’ comments often reflect a defensive posture, touting their efforts while complaining about the “burden” they bear from the influx of North African immigrants and looking to other European and North African governments for help. In keeping with the themes of “The Enemy Within,” one official discussing the influx of Tunisian refugees says that the Italian authorities are concerned that escaped convicts are “hiding among the refugees” (“Italy Struggles with Tunisia Influx,” 2011). When sub-Saharan Africans began arriving on Italian shores in May 2011, one reporter stated that, unlike the Tunisian immigrants, “they’ll be likely to claim asylum, *a new headache for Italy who would rather they hadn’t come in the first place*” (“Hundreds of Immigrants Reach Italian Island,” 2011, emphasis ours).

AL JAZEERA ARABIC’S COVERAGE OF IMMIGRATION IN ITALY

AJA has fewer stories covering immigration in Italy, but its coverage shares similar themes with AJE coverage overall in providing the perspective and plight of immigrants themselves. This appears to match Al Jazeera’s agenda to act as counterweight to Western-dominated news systems, counteracting Western coverage that marginalizes the situation of illegal immigrants. Human rights and international law are often invoked in Arabic-language coverage, unlike AJE coverage—the search function on AJA’s website actually features a “Freedom and Rights” category. This most likely reflects the great emphasis placed on human rights and international law in Arabic

media within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Israeli presence in the Occupied Territories.

AJA uses immigrants' arrival in Italy to criticize the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, which provides further evidence for the current geopolitics of Al Jazeera as a whole. As Al Jazeera's coverage was largely viewed as pivotal and indispensable within the wider media coverage of the Arab Spring, its spotlight quickly turned to Gaddafi after the fall of dictators in Egypt and in Tunisia. After the NATO intervention in the Libyan uprising, Gaddafi turned on Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and Italian authorities, with whom he had re-established diplomatic relations in 2009, threatening to create "a sea of chaos" on the Mediterranean by sending waves of migrants to Italy's shores. While there was no actual evidence of Gaddafi's role, Italian authorities are quoted in a 2011 AJA story titled "The Continuing Flow of Refugees to Italy," speculating on his involvement in sending a recent ship full of migrants to Italy. Also noteworthy is that the ship was clearly noted in the story as being full of sub-Saharan immigrants, appearing to strike a slightly more negative tone about this group's arrival. But, just as in AJE coverage, AJA stories mention the miserable journey undertaken by immigrants across the Mediterranean and the presence of children and women, some of whom are noted as being pregnant.

However, the criticism of the Italian government is more detailed and more pointed in AJA reporting than in AJE coverage. In a 2011 story titled "Italy Passes Law against Immigrants," AJA discusses the Italian legislature's approval of a law governing migrants waiting in "detention and expulsion centers" and the extension of their processing time up to 18 months. Only briefly mentioning one statement from the nativist and anti-immigrant Northern League political party, the story gives substantial voice to the political opposition to the law in Italy for the entire second half of the story. One leftist Italian politician notably describes the detention centers as "Guantanamo Bay." While the coverage is sparser in AJA than the regular coverage provided by AJE, there are many discursive parallels, with much harsher criticism of European and Arab governments.

AL JAZEERA ENGLISH ON IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

AJE coverage of immigration in the United States, almost exclusively focused on Arizona, is particularly fascinating. AJE aired at least four half-hour specials on different feature programs investigating the "climate of fear" faced by Mexican immigrants living in the United States illegally. One surprising aspect is the sheer amount of focus given to the challenges faced by illegal immigrants and the harsh toll that new laws like Arizona's SB1070 take on families portrayed in these televised specials. One show, *Activate*, which documents the political activism of young people around the world, features

a Latina teenager living illegally in the United States as she leads political action in hope of reforming US law. Josh Rushing's *Faultlines* provided a look at SB1070 from multiple perspectives, highlighting viewpoints from Mexican immigrants, law enforcement, and American political figures.

AJE is quite critical of US government positions and policy on illegal immigration. In particular, it lends substantial attention to Republican political figures, especially Jan Brewer, the governor of Arizona who championed the passage of SB1070. Her portrayal is especially unflattering, with her proud comments supporting the bill always met with a reporting angle that draws attention to its "chilling effect" on hardworking Mexican immigrants. Her exploitation of the immigration issue is specifically and repeatedly presented as cheap political maneuvering. Some of the stories seem to carry an "only in America" tone or to suggest surprise and disbelief at the actual harshness of US border enforcement. The harshness of the laws on people who compose such a necessary part of the American economy is described as raw political gain combined with a bit of the absurdist theater that is American politics, with the coverage of Brewer serving as a prime example.

In an interesting link to US military action in the Middle East, a 2010 opinion piece for *In Focus* titled "US Drones Prowl Mexico Bicentennial" discusses the American use of a fleet of drones to patrol the US-Mexico border 24 hours a day. The use of drones is labeled a "disturbing development" in "growing tensions with the country's biggest trading partner and fiercest historical adversary." The characterization of Mexico as the "fiercest historical adversary" of the United States is historically questionable, at best. The article uses elements of US-Middle East policy and warfare as a model for observing US actions to control immigration and to label Mexican migrants as security threats.

In the sheer breadth of coverage, it is clear that AJE has its finger on the pulse on American politics as a whole. From the Democratic support for the DREAM Act to the use of immigration as a wedge issue in Republican presidential primary debates, as well as in the Arizona gubernatorial race, AJE's reporting is comprehensive and accurately conveys differing political positions on these issues. However, a number of op-eds by writers like Mark LeVine and Roza Kazan launched relentless attacks against Republicans on immigration policies. In the 2012 article "Republicans Change Tune for Hispanic Votes", the Republican candidates for the 2012 presidential nomination are labeled as "two-faced politicians," yet the article does accurately track their vacillating statements on illegal immigration, which change depending simply on the demographics of the state holding the next primary election for the nomination. One 2011 piece titled "Global Capitalism and the 21st Century Fascism" is an articulate but polemical attack on reactionary politics and the economic exploitation of the downtrodden but stands out as a piece that would hardly see the light of day in the American media.

Much of the reporting focuses on the stories of immigrants themselves and their dangerous travels across the border. Some interviews with illegal

immigrant workers show their dismay at how they are being treated as pawns within the US political system and criminalized after years of hard work. In a 2011 segment titled “US State to Enforce Tough Immigration Bill,” one immigrant states, “We’re not here to do any harm; we came here to do good. We do hard work. Most people—Americans—won’t do it. I have worked in grease up to my knees, in terrible heat.” The report then cuts to a scene of Alabama governor Robert Bentley standing with three other white men, congratulating one another on the signing of their harsh anti-illegal immigrant law. A similar scene was aired about SB1070, depicting Brewer signing the Arizona law and shaking hands with several white men afterward. The local political organizing undertaken by Latino immigrants in Arizona constitutes much of the televised coverage, lending them substantial political agency in the eyes of AJE viewers. The professional tone of the reporting, excluding the written op-ed pieces, is playing to and addressing both an American and a global audience. Much attention is also given to the apparent dysfunction, extreme partisanship, and gridlock that were the reality of US legislative politics in 2012. As a result, the plights of immigrants in limbo are juxtaposed with the political wrangling evidenced in AJA’s and AJE’s reporting on Italy.

AL JAZEERA ARABIC ON IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The coverage of AJA on immigration and immigrants in the United States is also notable, if only for the fact that it is essentially nonexistent. Where there is coverage, it is intended for an Arabic audience and placed in the context of wider global issues. The search on AJA, even with an expanded set of search terms, resulted in no in-depth televised specials, op-eds, or usable published articles that fell within the scope of this study. Simply put, the issue of illegal immigrants and US policy toward them is not seen as important to a regional Arabic audience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

The most striking differences between AJA and AJE found in this research are in the coverage of immigration in the United States. AJE, as a news organization, appears exceptionally interested in and in touch with US politics, and it lends highly sympathetic coverage to immigrants and the challenges they face as a result of recent anti-immigrant legislation. It is remarkable that AJA has no meaningful coverage of the issue as a regional Arabic news source. AJA’s lack of coverage of illegal immigrants in the United States may be a result of the Arab world’s own history of violating the human rights of its own illegal workers. These problems are especially pronounced in the treatment of foreign domestic workers in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia and in the conditions faced by construction workers in the United Arab Emirates

and other wealthy Persian Gulf states. Our findings suggest that AJA may not wish to raise a debate on human rights violations associated with illegal immigration in the United States, perhaps in order to avoid the risk that viewers will push for a wider investigation into similar problems within the Arab world, thereby upsetting its viewership across the region.

Conversely, there are numerous parallels in the coverage by AJA and AJE of immigration in Italy. Both channels and electronic news sites run stories that attack politicians in North Africa and Europe, especially Gaddafi and Berlusconi, and they do well in providing insight into what African—especially North African—immigrants face after their arrival in Italy. The living situations are well documented in AJE, but this study found no such corresponding coverage on AJA. Notably, both AJA and AJE centered their coverage on the island of Lampedusa, with AJE covering an immigrant processing center in Genoa, in northern Italy, only once. In the coverage by both sources, immigrants are portrayed as being caught in limbo because of European politicians shirking their duty to face up to the refugee/immigrant problem and the consequences of their intervention in Libya.

In regard to differences in AJA coverage of immigration in Italy and the United States, it appears that AJA believes that its Arabic audience is interested in the situations of North African immigrants and refugees and not at all interested in the situation facing immigrants, primarily Latinos, to the United States. This may very well be true.

We argue that the only differences in AJE's coverage of immigration in the United States and in Italy are situational and contextual. In both cases, the politicians that led the decision making on immigration are portrayed as dysfunctional, self-interested, and completely unsympathetic to the plight of immigrants. The humanity of these North African and Latino immigrants is absent from the political discourse highlighted in politicians' statements and emerges only in AJE's brand of humanitarian reporting within the news story. The immigrants in both regions are portrayed by AJE as political pawns, exploited for short-term political gain by white politicians competing for power. Meanwhile, the immigrants and refugees given a voice in the stories stress their respectable work histories and express dismay at their treatment, thus creating an image of governments on two different continents that are unwilling to take responsibility for a massive structural social problem. Taking this into account, Al Jazeera clearly emphasizes a humanitarian perspective on the issue of immigration in their reporting, which sets its coverage apart from its Western counterparts.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study found appreciable differences in coverage by AJA and AJE on the subject of immigration, reflective of the fact that Al Jazeera, as a news organization, is very mindful of its regional viewing audiences, which in turn

is perhaps a reflection of its remarkable rise in popularity and legitimacy as a news source throughout the world. However, it also raises questions as to how Al Jazeera views its role as a news outlet both regionally and globally. Al Jazeera has surely come to understand and appreciate its role in perpetuating the Arab Spring (though this deserves additional study). Although it is inadvisable to generalize in light of this study's focus on a relatively small corpus of the coverage, this chapter contributes to research on immigration reporting and adds to literature observing Al Jazeera's coverage of contentious political and social issues. The growing global popularity of Al Jazeera and the nature of its stories on immigration might prod Western news outlets to offer more thorough coverage of humanitarian issues surrounding immigration in both Europe and the United States, more adequately engaging the reality and hardships so often faced by immigrants across the world, as Al Jazeera has seemingly striven to do.

NOTES

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