

## The al-Jazeera revelation

By Saleh Bechir,  
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The absurdity of censorship attempts is that they usually end by exposing to the audience what they seek to hide. The reaction of the British government to the *Mirror* report about George W Bush and al-Jazeera is a perfect illustration. If Tony Blair's office had wanted to confirm the newspaper's claim – that a memo of a meeting between the United States president and the British prime minister indicated that Bush wished to bomb the Qatar-based broadcaster – it would have reacted in precisely the same way.

This is self-defeating [1] as well as heavy-handed: for in mobilising an exceptional legal arsenal to suppress the memo and prosecute those involved in its circulation, the British government gave credibility to a scoop published in a tabloid [2] renowned for its animosity towards the current American administration.

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Also by Saleh Bechir (with Hazem Saghieh) in **openDemocracy**, "The 'Muslim community': a European invention" (October 2005 [4])

### More in openDemocracy about al-Jazeera:

Fuad Nahdi, "Doublespeak: Islam and the media" (April 2003 [4])

James Curran & David Elstein, "Paradox of freedom on the media frontline" (October 2001 [4])

Hazem Saghieh, "Al-Jazeera: the world through Arab eyes" (June 2004 [4])

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The details of the memo remain to be established. What does seem plausible [5] is that President Bush did indeed contemplate a warlike action against an Arabic television channel, whose headquarters are the property of an allied government and situated on its territory. This prospect fortunately has not happened, and therefore has not become another instrument in America's campaign against "terrorism" or for "the promotion of democracy" in the middle east.

At the same time, the very idea that it might or could happen – that the thought crossed the mind and the utterance crossed the lips of the most powerful leader in the world – is emblematic of a drifting "war on terror" which endlessly violates its own justifications. This war, supposedly pursued in the name of noble democratic ideals, has in fact flouted [6] them, and exposed them as untruthful pretexts for its true imperial goals.

From this point of view, and not prejudging its military or political outcome, the war is already a failure. From Guantánamo [6] to Abu Ghraib, from the CIA “black sites” in Europe [6] to the use of white phosphorus on the civilians of Fallujah, the American war has become unbearable. These deeds, if committed by any other “rogue state”, would be considered war crimes or crimes against humanity. True, there is no such thing as a “clean war”. But Bush’s war is self-polluted by the blatant contradictions between its claimed motivations and its reality.

The al-Jazeera case [7] is a symptomatic illustration. As controversial as the TV channel may be, nothing could justify such a radical “criticism” of the kind contemplated by the American president. The broadcasting organisation is ultimately nothing but a medium of information [8], one that may be disliked but that cannot be assimilated to any military objective.

Except, perhaps, through the current American leadership’s vision that sees its relation with the outside world – and particularly the “greater middle east” – through a military lens. This entails the reduction of the “other” to the simple, undifferentiated status of a holistic enemy. The enemy is a core, a whole: there is no difference, in this mentality, between the Qatari office of a television channel and the Tora Bora bunker of an Osama bin Laden [9].

The war has cast a fresh light on Karl von Clausewitz’s [10] famous assertion that war is the continuation of politics by other means; this war seems rather to empty, supplant, and replace politics with what the political philosopher Carl Schmitt [11] regarded as primordial: the “friend-enemy relationship”. Perhaps this is why George W Bush has a military strategy to fight terrorism, export democracy or carry through the United States’s imperial projects – but doesn’t seem to have a political strategy.

**On the international law implications of the al-Jazeera / Bush issue, see this article on the Crimes of War [12] website:**

Anthony Dworkin, “When it is lawful to bomb TV and radio stations?” (December 2005 [13])

War – especially the imperial combat experienced by Britain in India or France in Algeria – imposes its will on other peoples in a way that undermines principles of law and democracy. The difference in nature between the two is extreme: war too easily becomes an area of exception that suspends law (embodied to perfection in Guantánamo [13]), while democracy belongs to the area of conventions, deliberately accepted and conditioned by peace. Imperial order can impose pacification as long as the balance of power allows it, but can never create peace, a condition of democracy.

The al-Jazeera [14] case is a near-absurd demonstration of this historically recurrent failing, but with a modern (or postmodern) twist. Democracy, used to legitimate an illegal expansionary war, can degenerate into “democratism”: that is, an ideological construct that can find a plausible argument for the unjustifiable – even the bombing of a television channel.

*This article was translated from French by Alexandra Matine*

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#### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1123/dailyUpdate.html> target=\_blank

[2] <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/>

tm\_objectid=16397937&method=full&siteid=94762&headline=exclusive--bush-plot-to-bomb-his-arab-ally-name\_page.html target=\_blank

- [3] <http://salehbashir.blogspot.com/> target=\_blank
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- [5] [http://www.truthout.org/docs\\_2005/113005Q.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/113005Q.shtml) target=\_blank
- [6] <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1651765,00.html> target=\_blank
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- [10] <http://www.sonshi.com/clausewitz1-1.html> target=\_blank
- [11] <http://www.algonet.se/~pmanzoor/CarlSchmitt.htm> target=\_blank
- [12] <http://www.crimesofwar.org/index-mag.html> target=\_blank
- [13] <http://www.crimesofwar.org/onnews/news-aljazeera.html> target=\_blank
- [14] <http://english.aljazeera.net/HomePage> target=\_blank



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