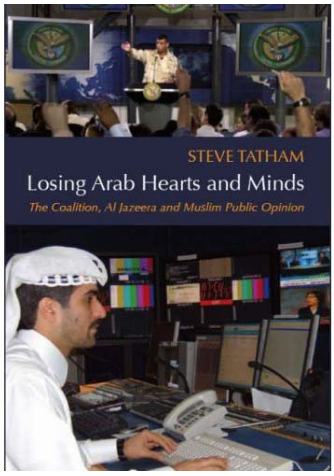

Title: Losing Arab Hearts and Minds: The Coalition, Al-Jazeera and Muslim Public Opinion

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Steve Tatham's book starts with the observation that the 9/11 attacks horrified not only western citizens but also moderate Muslims around the world. Consequently, an unexpected degree of solidarity appeared to flicker in the international community. In the aftermath of 9/11, there was wide condemnation of Al-Qaeda acts, and a majority of those polled had a favorable sentiment towards the United States and all that it stood for. Yet within two years the pain and distress of that event and the unifying sympathy it elicited throughout most of the world was squandered – not necessarily through the invasion of Afghanistan, but through the subsequent war in Iraq which many of the closest friends of the United States did not support. Tatham argues that having largely lost international support, the United States failed to get its justification and messages across to skeptical international audiences, particularly in the Arab world. The massive efforts of the Coalition's covert information operation – the leaflets and radio broadcasts, the text messages and e-mails – were only partly effective in the absence of honest and transparent engagement with the region's media.

Unlike in the Gulf War, the medium for the Coalition's messages in 2003 was not exclusively CNN or the BBC; the Arab world had developed its own TV channels, and their reach and influence were to become an important dynamic in the conflict. The most influential of these were Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, and Abu Dhabi TV.

From humble beginnings in 1996, Al-Jazeera, in particular, has grown in size and output, and today broadcasts 24 hours a day to an audience estimated at more than 35 million people. As CNN became the face of the 1991 Gulf war, so Al-Jazeera defined the first conflicts of the twenty-first century – coming of age in Afghanistan (it was the only broadcaster officially allowed into the country by the Taliban government) and becoming a major influence in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Indeed, as the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote: '[Al-Jazeera] is not only the biggest media phenomenon to hit the Arab world since the advent of television, it is also the biggest political phenomenon.'

Al-Jazeera may not be perfect given that its programs can be lurid, sensational, and over-heated. It may not always report events exactly – inaccuracies may creep in as the channel battles its competitors to bring the news to Arab screens first. It experiences almost identical problems to every other 24-hour news broadcasting organization across the world. But, it is a fact that Al-Jazeera is the nearest the Arab world has to an independent media organization. And given the importance placed by the United States on free speech, and the enthusiasm for it that US supporters for emerging democracy in the Middle East once expressed, the criticisms directed at Al-Jazeera may well be unsustainable. Indeed, for a significant proportion of the world's media, Al-Jazeera is seen as an honest conduit of Arab feeling and, as such, is regarded as vital to balancing the debate.

Tatham points out that it is paradoxical that although the United States – from the outset – had led the effort to engage with the Arab press, it appeared to give that up just as the conflict began. Although engagement with the Arab media in Britain had been poor, as the war progressed many sections of the British government seemed to recognize that Al-Jazeera and the other pan-Arab channels needed to be listened to. Arab media provided a very important, perhaps unique, perspective on the war – an indicator of wider Arab sentiment. However, despite obvious good intent, the symbiotic relationship between the Coalition and the strategically important Arab media appeared never to evolve from the drawing-board. Far from having an imaginative and targeted media campaign that would build on past US achievements, the American-led coalition directed its efforts almost entirely at its own domestic audiences and hugely patriotic US market.

The author suggests that, in considering the reaction of the Arab world to the Iraqi crisis, it is necessary to differentiate between the opinion of the 'Arab Street' and the public and private opinions of the Arab regimes that hold power over the street. If the war was unpopular with the British public, then across 22 Arab countries it was generally greeted on the 'Street' with hostility and anger. Across Arab borders there exists commonality in language, religion, and consciousness. Arabic is spoken on two continents, across the breadth of North Africa, through the Arabian peninsula and into the Gulf. It is the official language of more than 120 million people, making it one of the 10 most widely spoken in the world; in addition to being the sixth official language of the UN.

Feelings of dismay, suspicion, and resignation blended together in an environment already deeply distrustful of the world's last remaining superpower. Tatham points out four key issues that emerged in the Arab collective. First, Arab populations developed an enormous concern for the potential fate of Iraqi civilians, who were regarded with considerable sympathy. Second, the Arab world was unable to understand how Israeli aggression against Palestinians in the occupied territories could continue, and seemingly with US support. Arabs regarded the Israeli government in much the same way as the Americans regarded Saddam Hussein. Thirdly, the Arab world was hugely concerned about the legitimacy of the Coalition's actions. The absence of a definitive UN Security Council resolution, the refusal to allow UN weapons inspectors to continue their work, and the tenuous connections between Saddam's regime and the 9/11 attacks also raised serious doubts in Arab minds. Finally, many Arabs questioned the future intentions of the United States, believing that the forthcoming war was to be fought either as unfinished business left over from the Administration of the President's father, or over the issue of oil. Steve Tatham asserts that the Arab world simply did not trust or believe the US Administration when it said that Iraqi oil was for the Iraqis.

In addition, Tatham thinks that the absence of Arab media with the Coalition forces was a wasted opportunity, which served only to reinforce unhelpful ideas of marginalization and lack of interest in Arab public opinion. Placing Arab media with the forces would undoubtedly have been a risk, but there were also potential benefits. Arab audiences would have been able to view Coalition soldiers as individuals, rather than as an oppressive and invading presence. Moreover, they might have been able to see the care and attention that – the Coalition claimed – was paid to selecting targets and the way in which captured Iraqi troops and injured civilians were attended to.

Accepting that Arab media had a greater level of personal familiarity with the conflict than their Western counterparts is important when considering allegations of bias. Thus, the author asks: Were the pan-Arab satellite news channels institutionally biased against the United States and Britain in their news reporting? His answer is 'No', although there is evidence that many of the discussion programs, notably 'The Opposite Direction' on Al-Jazeera, were inflammatory in their coverage of events.

The Arab channels, nonetheless, appear to believe that their work was deliberately impeded by the Coalition. Arab media were comprehensively, though not invariably, treated very different from their Western counterparts. From the outset, Arab media were not embedded with Coalition forces due to concerns over operational security.

Yet, if the US administration were to succeed in its ambitions for democracy and stability in the Middle East, it would need to engage with Arab hearts and minds. Tatham thinks that the United States needs to approach regional public diplomacy in a fundamentally new way, opening direct dialogue with the Arab and Islamic world through its already existing, and increasingly influential, transnational media. Yet this requires a fundamental change in mindset. The US seeks to portray what it regards as 'truth'; it believes that existing transnational media are inherently biased. Evidence suggests that from a cultural viewpoint alone this may be the case. Yet, a more fundamental question is: does it even matter if Arab media are biased? The fact remains that channels such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, and Abu Dhabi TV enjoy legitimacy and credibility throughout the Arab world. Can the US risk *not* engaging with them?

Arab media networks have massive public support throughout the Muslim world, and undoubtedly reflect a strong vein of Muslim and Arab opinion. It is not surprising that they largely play to the predisposition of their audiences. It follows, therefore, that if the West wishes to enhance dialogue with the Middle East and explain its policies, it has to do so through a credible forum, which should consist of organic pan-Arab TV channels.

One hopes that Steve Tatham's suggestion that the West enhance its dialogue with the Middle East through a credible forum of Arab media will be heeded promptly.