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I

WE ARE WHAT WE WATCH

Sherif Helal, a Muslim Canadian of Middle Eastern descent, barely stirs when his alarm clock goes off at the same time every Wednesday morning. Even though the clock is set at its highest volume, the entire household sometimes wakes before Sherif lifts his head from the pillow. The snooze button is within striking distance, but lately Sherif hasn't been using it. His sleep is intermittent and shallow, interrupted occasionally by nightmares of falling buildings, exploding bombs, and mass graves. On one occasion, he dreamed he was trapped in the basement of one of New York City's World Trade Center towers, in absolute solitude, rubble all around, listening to shouts and rescue calls overhead. With his shirt covering his mouth and nose, he screamed at the top of his voice "Here! I'm here!" The images he's seen on television—of the motionless escalators and ghostly white debris blanketing everything—flash back constantly. Like the millions who watched the events of September 11, 2001, unfold in utter disbelief, Sherif's life had changed.

Now he wakes on the first ring of the alarm and rushes straight to the living room to find out any news he may have missed overnight. His father, Kamal Helal, beats him to the television by a half-hour, giving his twenty-three-year-old son the one-line synopsis. "They're on the doors of Kandahar." Kamal explains.

As the family sits at the breakfast table, all eyes are fixed on the television, located close by in the adjacent living room. All chairs are turned toward the screen. A year ago, the Helal family became addicted to the news. "Even if they bomb Afghanistan to the ground, they won't find Osama bin Laden. He's an elusive rascal," remarks Sherif, breaking the attentive silence.

"Do you really think he's in Afghanistan? He knows that if the Americans think he's there, they will come and get him. He must be somewhere else," says Sherif's mother, Naama Helal.

"What about the videotape of bin Laden on Al-Jazeera? Some geologist said that the rocks behind him are from a precise area in the Afghan mountains," suggests Sherif.

"I think he's just playing cat-and-mouse games with the Americans. Sends them to Afghanistan when he could be in Sri Lanka," replies Kamal. "Well at least they're getting rid of the Taliban," he continues.

Sherif interrupts: "But what about all the casualties in Afghanistan? I mean all these photos Al-Jazeera is showing. It's frightening. And you don't see any of them on CNN."

"Well, of course. What do you expect? America has to sell the war to its people, and showing these images won't do that," responds Kamal.

"So it's just like the Intifada (uprising) in Palestine. You only see something on CNN when Israelis are killed but not when Palestinians are killed," Sherif retorts.

"Well, maybe. But in Afghanistan, the Americans are stakeholders. This is *their* retaliation to what happened in New York. So they have a lot more invested than in Palestine," Kamal adds.

This is ordinary conversation among the Helal family every morning as they try to make sense of the information they receive from Al-Jazeera, the Arabic satellite TV news network that broadcasts from the tiny peninsular country of Qatar, located in the Arabian Gulf. For the first time, table talk revolves

around politics, instead of what new music CD is selling, what the kids will do that evening, school reports, and phone bills. These days, Al-Jazeera sets the agenda. Although the Helals got Al-Jazeera as part of an Arabic satellite package a number of years ago, they took real notice of Al-Jazeera only the year before, in October 2000. Since the beginning of the second Palestinian Intifada, the network has been the preferred source of news for the family.

The discussion is interrupted only by a glimpse at the clock on the wall. Sherif picks up his coffee in one hand, tosses his knapsack over his other shoulder, waves his good-bye *salams* and walks out the front door. Like many students living in eastern Canada, Sherif sets off for campus.

One year ago, on a morning in October 2000, Sherif sipped a cup of coffee while hastily striding to his electromechanics class. A third-year student, Sherif is living up to the family expectations and carrying on the tradition of becoming an engineer. He is one of hundreds of Palestinians who lived in Kuwait whose families emigrated to the eastern Canadian maritime city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Sherif lives as any Canadian would; he received citizenship at a ceremony one year earlier.

When he arrived at class, he scanned the room and found a vacant seat next to his friend and classmate, Samy Mounir, a Copt (Egyptian Orthodox Christian). A handsome, clean-shaven, and keen-dressing young man, Samy often saves a seat for Sherif. An Egyptian who landed in Halifax the same year as Sherif, his family also moved from Kuwait in the aftermath of the liberation, although under different circumstances.

It doesn't take a visitor long to notice that the number of students of Middle Eastern descent is disproportionately large in the Dalhousie University engineering program. Historically, the

eastern Canadian province of Nova Scotia, of which Halifax is the capital, has seen little overall immigration compared to the larger provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. However, Halifax's Middle Eastern community, owing to the large influx of immigrants that started in the early 1990s, is now the city's second largest visible minority group after African Canadians. Many of those who moved from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates sought more secure lifestyles in Canada. The Gulf War had destabilized many regions in the Middle East, and those who arrived—entrepreneurs, investors, refugees—found safe harbor in Nova Scotia. Home to Canada's second largest port and the largest city in far eastern Canada, Halifax provided ample opportunity for work, education, and comparatively inexpensive travel back to the Middle East during holidays.

For many of the city's inhabitants, the immigration seemed overwhelmingly quick. It was as if floodgates from the Middle East had opened, pouring in peoples from a host of countries and cultures. It seemed that Arabic became a second language almost overnight on the streets of this fishing town. Although the Arab community in Halifax is nowhere near as established as those in the U.S. cities of Dearborn, Michigan, and Toledo, Ohio, the community and cultural landscape have changed swiftly and dramatically in less than a decade. Arab-owned stores have sprung up on every major street, and local community radio station CKDU-FM is home to the largest number of Arabic-language specialty programs.

The first word of Arabic was broadcast here on October 7, 1995, by a group of amateur programmers hosting a show called *Radio Egypt*. Four years later, the program won an award from Canada's National Campus and Community Radio Association in the category of community involvement for its all-day broadcast of the political specialty program *Through Arab Eyes*.

Courses on Islam and Arabic language classes are now regular offerings at each of the city's universities.

Six years since arriving, Sherif and Samy now call Halifax home. Known for hosting the G-7 conference in 1995 and made famous by the *Titanic's* wreckage off its coast, Halifax leaves its newcomers little to desire. They participate in the city's local restaurants and nightlife—Thursday's wing night at the Oasis or Your Father's Moustache, the occasional beavertail (a hot wheat pastry that resembles a beaver's tail with sweet and savory toppings), or an occasional night out at the Palace disco. However, their apparent adjustment to life in Halifax should not be mistaken for complete assimilation. Sherif and Samy, like many Arab immigrants, remain profoundly connected to their Middle Eastern roots. The satellite package that provides Arabic television reception 5,000 miles away from its source also provides Arab families with a "real" connection to their favorite Arabic programs.

Before their move to Halifax, Sherif's father, Kamal, worked for a civil engineering company in Kuwait for twenty years. Kamal's parents, now deceased, had moved to Kuwait in the 1960s, escaping from dire conditions in the Palestinian town of Ramallah. Kamal's three children, Sherif being the youngest, were all born in the same maternity ward in Kuwait. The Helals still speak fondly about the years they spent in Kuwait, the country that Kamal's children knew as their only home. It wasn't until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the early hours of August 2, 1990, that everything changed. The machine-gun fire in the streets, artillery fire, curfews, rising inflation, lack of running water, and food rations made for difficult living conditions that lasted the seven months between the Iraqi invasion and the U.S.-led liberation. Naama, Kamal's wife, recalls how Sherif would hide, shivering under his blanket from the sounds of explosions. He would become nauseated and sick when the build-

ing shook from the shelling. Sherif would calm down only when the bombing ceased.

Following the liberation of Kuwait in February 1991 by the Coalition forces led by the United States, the country's reinstated government under the Al-Sabah family implemented policies that prevented many Palestinians who resided there from renewing their permits and employment contracts. This was an act of protest and retaliation by Kuwait's rulers against the Palestinian Liberation Organization's support of Saddam Hussein. On numerous occasions, Palestinians were charged with cooperating with Iraqi occupying forces during the short-lived occupation. The conclusion was simple: The Palestinians, who once comprised the largest percentage of expatriate workers in Kuwait, were branded as traitors and had to leave. A few who were fortunate enough to have travel documents issued by other Arab states after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war were admitted into these countries. Many others were not.

The Helals were among the lucky. They endured considerable discomfort at the airports and customs desks, but their Egyptian travel documents allowed them to leave Kuwait and live temporarily in Cairo, where they had distant relatives and many friends. Life was not much easier in Cairo. Kamal was jobless, and Naama had never worked. There was much talk and gossip about emigrating to Western countries. Kamal heard that immigrating to Canada was relatively inexpensive and that the procedures were less difficult than those in the United States. It was an option that surely appealed to many of those formerly employed in Kuwait. Kamal opted quickly to stand in line at the Canadian embassy in Cairo for days in those scorching sun to speak to an official and start the emigration process. It undoubtedly tried his patience, and anxiety racked his family.

Although a child at that time, Sherif remembers the day when his father came home from the embassy smiling broadly—his fa-

ther hadn't laughed or joked for months. Sherif, oblivious to the details at the time, knew something good was imminent. Kamal clicked open his leather Samsonite suitcase, pulled out a large yellow envelope, waved it around, and let out a cry of relief that echoed in the little apartment they were all crammed in: "We're going to Canada!"

A little more than eight years after that monumental day, Sherif and family are full-fledged Canadians, possessing the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship to go with their navy-blue passports to document it.

While the instructor recited and reviewed one formula and problem after another, Sherif was too restless and distracted to focus. Twenty minutes into class, Sherif turned to Samy, signaling to him. He reached over Samy's right ear and asked, "Did you see Al-Jazeera yesterday?" Samy shook his head, but his curiosity was aroused. Sherif rarely watched Arabic television and commented that he despised its "backward" programming style. He added that he preferred American networks, choosing *The Simpsons* on Fox and Jay Leno on NBC's *Tonight Show* over any Arabic film or soap opera. He argued frequently with his parents about Arabic music and how it lacked creativity.

"The Arabic music videos are all the same, and all the singers sound alike," he would say. Sherif added that he would much rather watch the music charts on Much Music, the Canadian version of MTV. For this reason, the question from Sherif—"Did you see Al-Jazeera yesterday?"—was unexpected.

But his question was also rhetorical, for Samy's family, unlike Sherif's, has no satellite dish. In fact, two days earlier, Samy's family, the Mounirs, visited Kamal and Naama specifically to watch Al-Jazeera. "No. What was on?" replied Samy.

Sherif uttered a few sighs and resorted to paper to explain. He tore a sheet from his notebook, scribbled a few words, and

passed it to Samy. As he read Sherif's note, Samy's face turned to one of shock and disbelief. The note read, "18 in Israel. The most since 1956."

The news since late September, 2000, reported little more than numbers, statistics, body counts. Sherif had been providing Samy with daily Palestinian death tolls from the ongoing conflict in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. This day's numbers were shocking because all the dead were Palestinians in Israel, not the Gaza Strip, West Bank, or other occupied territories. It was indeed the biggest single-day death toll for Palestinians living inside Israel since 1956.

Many Arabs attribute the beginning of the so-called New Intifada, or second Palestinian uprising, to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount on September 28, 2000. From that moment forth Arabs worldwide have avidly watched their televisions. The Intifada has resulted in a tally of deaths on both sides. The few days after September 28 were especially gruesome. Just two days later, Samy's family visited the Helals and watched as Al-Jazeera rebroadcast the footage of twelve-year-old Mohammed Al-Durra's death. He was shot by Israeli fire in his father's arms; the short clip was unforgettable. Eight men, women, and children sat, tears filling their eyes, in that Canadian home, silently watching the clip and the interviews that followed, a reaction that is known to have been shared by many Arabs around the world.

Only days after the broadcast of the death of Al-Durra, a song called "Jerusalem Will Return to Us," featuring some of the top Arab recording artists reciting the young boy's name, was broadcast on some of the major Arabic networks. From that point forth, Al-Durra had become an icon of the Intifada.

Sherif's family was one of the first to subscribe to Arabic satellite television. As subscription prices fell, most Arab homes in Halifax installed the service, and those who didn't subscribe be-

fore the September 11 attacks on New York City and the Pentagon are now buying and installing satellite dishes. When the Helals initially decided to install their satellite package, their reasons were different. Shortly after the family moved into their home in Halifax, Kamal and Naama often quarreled with their children over their behavior, religious traditions, and customary rituals. Sherif, who at one time hardly missed a single prayer (Muslims pray five times a day), now habitually procrastinated. His parents also noticed his growing preference for speaking English instead of Arabic at home, something that prompted them to take action.

Unlike most Arab families, the Helals have not returned to the Middle East since their departure six years earlier. This lack of contact with the Arab world surely prompted Kamal and Naama's decision to bring Arabic television into their home. In some ways, they hoped it would help preserve their children's sense of culture and religion. In all likelihood, Kamal and Naama also had personal reasons. As recent immigrants, they would have missed their homeland, yearning to watch anything Arabic on television. They taped their favorite Arabic *mas-rabiyaat* (comedy plays) and watched them so frequently that they could recite the scripts by heart. The satellite dish, once installed, would change all this.

On the many evenings following September 28, 2000 and the Intifada, the Helals would huddle around the television to watch Al-Jazeera's latest news and onsite reporting from Jerusalem and the Palestinian cities of Ramallah, Beit Jala, and Bethlehem. "We used to watch CNN to hear the news from the Arab world, but now we have Al-Jazeera," Kamal explained in a conversation we shared. Although he is a fluent English-speaker, his command and comprehension of Arabic is far superior. But language, he said, wasn't the problem he had with some of the American and Canadian networks. It's what they chose to cover.

Samy would join the Helals to watch the latest developments of the Intifada on Al-Jazeera. With a fresh approach to news and talk shows, it immediately became the favored station for the Arabic community living in Halifax. In circumstances that must have been replicated throughout the world, Haligonian Arabs would talk incessantly about the Al-Jazeera coverage. Never before had firsthand, day-to-day events inside Israeli and Palestinian controlled areas been so widely broadcast—and in Arabic, no less. During the early days of the Intifada typical chit-chat between, say, shop owners, taxicab drivers, and their customers would eventually lead to a discussion about the uprising and Al-Jazeera. The two had become inseparable.

During breaks from computer games and snacks, Sherif and Samy would return to the living room to catch up on Al-Jazeera's latest broadcast. A small discussion would ensue, after which they would return to their games.

In the beginning, the Helals' satellite hookup was something of a novelty, and the family received many visits from neighbors and friends; together they would watch entertainment shows, Lebanese concerts, Syrian soap operas, and Egyptian classic films. In those earlier days Al-Jazeera was just another news channel, but the recent outbreak of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories transformed it into must-see TV in a painfully personal sense.

In November 2000, Samy Mounir's family connected the satellite service to their own home and watched Al-Jazeera just as avidly as the Helals. "It's contagious," says Samy. "I mean, it's exactly what I want to see from a news station. It focuses on the area of the world I'm interested in and it's very critical, unlike all the other stations."

Having spent his life in the Arab world and then in Canada, Samy, like most Arab immigrants, has a basic awareness of their differences. He has much to say about government cor-

ruption in the Middle East. Today, he speaks less Arabic compared to when he first emigrated to Halifax, yet there is something intrinsically Arab about this young man. From outward appearance, Samy's ethnicity could fool the keenest eye. Like most students his age in Canada, Samy dresses in clothing purchased from popular retail chains; his goatee extends up to his sideburns, reflecting the style of North American hip-hop culture.

Over the years Samy has grown more opinionated and critical of his world. His parents and friends often complain that nothing pleases him, claiming that if finding fault in everything was a sport, then Samy would be its Wayne Gretzky. He argues over religion, politics, daily lifestyle, and most anything else. It appears that many of his opinions have emerged from his dual cultural experiences. "There are so many things that I disagree with in the Arab world and so many other things that I value," explains Samy. "The same goes for living here in the West. There are things that I like and others that I don't."

Samy states that Al-Jazeera is an undeniable influence. Its talk shows, although sometimes too argumentative even by Samy's high standards, reflect a whole spectrum of ideas and values. "I must say that when I first watched some of the talk shows, I was completely shocked," he explains. "They are battling it out on Arabic TV. I had never seen anything like it."

Traditionally, most discussion programs on Arabic TV stations are noncontroversial and do little else but serve as a public relations outlet for governments. Al-Jazeera provided the first exposure to opposing voices, using the power and persuasion of television. Samy admitted that at first he could not even fathom live broadcasts of what were once behind-closed-doors conversations.

"Some of the opinions on these shows you can get arrested for in most Arab countries," Samy said. "I can't believe most of the

people they've criticized on Al-Jazeera haven't been able to close the channel down." More important, Samy said he feels that Al-Jazeera has asked all the questions he's ever sought about his identity as an Arab Canadian. Thus, as Samy and Sherif struggle to define their identities, so too does the Arab world.

Al-Jazeera is playing a big part in this changing cultural definition. By questioning everything, Al-Jazeera has opened a window to issues long avoided and restricted by the Middle East. Samy acknowledges this as Al-Jazeera's greatest accomplishment: "More Arabs and even non-Arabs need to watch Al-Jazeera. It'll make us reflect more on how we think."

Even when it comes to coverage of recent events, Al-Jazeera is Samy's preferred source because it provides him with the news he wants, when he wants it. "I want minute-by-minute news from the Middle East, and that's what Al-Jazeera gives me," he explains. He adds that Al-Jazeera is sometimes like having an Arabic equivalent to *CNN Headline News*.

The Mounir family is similar to most Arab Canadians. Samy speaks for his family—if not his whole community—when he describes the primary reason for opening the satellite feed into his home. There is precious little reporting from the Middle East on the major American and Canadian networks.

Before their subscription, they would use the Internet and read the online versions of Arabic newspapers or BBC's World Service on the Arabic website. These were the primary news sources on the Middle East. When asked why he needed such sources for news on the Middle East, Samy said he believed Western TV networks assume that Americans and Canadians are simply not interested; as a result, events in that region are not covered in detail.

"They just don't have enough information about what is happening there," Samy complained. "The news is almost always recorded, never covered live. I wonder what they edit out?" he

questioned. Samy continued, "They always seem to favor non-Arabs in their reports. I don't want to hear Wolf Blitzer tell me what his impressions are of how the Arabs feel! I want to hear what the people in the street think." He also complains that political statements by Arab leaders are reduced to soundbites.

"When I watch the local networks, if I even find what I want, it's usually processed and then shown in little pieces. They spend more time covering an L.A. Lakers game than the death of twenty people in the West Bank," he explains, then backtracks: "Don't get me wrong, I'm a big Lakers fan! You know what I mean. . . . that's why I watch Al-Jazeera. The station and I agree on what is important."

The Helals claim something very different. Kamal believes very strongly that the true reason why U.S. TV networks do not show enough about the crisis in Israel and Palestinian territories is due to a Jewish media conspiracy. "Jews and Zionists control the media in the United States, so they don't show any images that are sympathetic to the Palestinians," he states adamantly.

He adds that he refuses to buy into the notion that commercial media networks are independent of political groups. When provoked, Kamal will spout dozens of statistics he retrieved online about the number of Jews involved in the media industry. "It's a complete monopoly," he argues. "It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. Just count the number of Israeli officials they speak to instead of Palestinian civilians," he responds when challenged.

When alternative possibilities are suggested, Kamal asserts that "there is no other explanation. . . . If there is a suicide attack in Israel, they have full coverage. But if twenty-five Palestinians are killed in one day in the Occupied Territories, then it gets two minutes on the news or it scrolls in a little headline across the bottom of the screen."

He argues furthermore that this conspiracy goes beyond TV programs. "Even Hollywood is run by Zionists," he states

bluntly. "When they show Arabs in Disney movies, they're always evil and ugly, but when they show a movie about Jews, like that cartoon *Prince of Egypt*, then they are sad and noble and deserve sympathy."

When told that the movie is a biblical story, Kamal immediately interjects by saying, "Okay, okay. . . . And then after the movie, they should show the audience what these same Jews are doing to Palestinians today. Right?"

When the Helals see on Al-Jazeera that the violence is intensifying in their hometown of Ramallah, they attempt to reach family members by phone to make sure they're safe and unharmed. Phone connections are difficult at best, often taking an hour before a connection can be established. It always has been an effort to call Ramallah, and once the call gets through the family would gather around, listening to glean any hint from the caller's voice about events happening thousands of miles away. This time, once the phone picked up, Kamal spoke into the handset loudly to ensure that he was heard on the other end.

"Allo . . . allo," he repeated. "Allo, *Al Sallamo Aleikom*" (an Arabic greeting, meaning "peace be upon you"). Hearing this, Naama and Sherif run down to the living room. Bringing their ears as close as possible to the handset, Naama and Sherif try to hear both sides of the conversation, to no avail. Kamal remained unfazed and continued conversing.

Kamal's aunt Fatma was on the other line. By far the most talkative member of the family, she could summarize several months of events in a ten-minute conversation. Since the beginning of the Intifada two weeks earlier, they had spoken to her twice. During each call, Fatma would describe horrifying stories of the Israeli soldiers, bombings, arbitrary arrests, and mass funerals. It wasn't very different from what the Arab Canadian families had seen on Al-Jazeera.

Today, Fatma was unusually quiet. Often volunteering unnecessary information, this time Fatma had little to say. Naama and Sherif heard the alarm growing in Kamal's voice as he pressed Fatma for information. "What's wrong? You're not yourself? Did something happen? Is everything all right? How is Aisha? What about Mohammed? Ibrahim?" With every name Kamal uttered, Naama and Sherif sat, waiting, apprehension no doubt rising.

"Who was it? Those bastards!" shouted Kamal.

"What's wrong? Tell me!" asked Naama, as Sherif embraced her.

"It's Fakhry, the neighbor's son," said Kamal with his hand muting the telephone receiver.

This was the first time that the effects of the Intifada struck close to the Helal family. After the phone call, the three sat silently for what seemed like hours. Fakhry was born the same month as Sherif. Kamal recalled stories about the young man, whom he had carried on his shoulders as a child. This time it was different. It was too close.

Unlike his parents, Sherif had never been to Ramallah. He had never met any of these people: Fatma, Mohammed, Aisha, Ibrahim, or even Fakhry. The only bond he had with them was through his parents, several casual phone conversations, and Al-Jazeera. Still, his heart must have ached as he imagined himself in Fakhry's shoes.

From that point on, Sherif made it a personal job to educate and inform everyone around him about the conflict in the Middle East. Through his involvement with local peace groups, Arabic societies, and Muslim associations, he organized public lectures, panel discussions, workshops, and the occasional demonstration.

Kamal's reaction to the violence and bloodshed could be seen in the family's household and in the way he controlled how the

family watched Al-Jazeera. Kamal would sometimes act as self-titled censor: Anything that questioned the tenets of Islamic faith, according to Kamal, a relatively conservative Muslim, would be unacceptable. He would switch off the station.

“Although the station is good in how it covers the news, it sometimes argues about all these things that we think are holy. I think that’s very bad,” he explained.

Naama agreed, but her view comes from a different place. A fifty-two-year-old housewife, she’s received limited schooling. She wears a *hijab* (veil) to cover her hair, but not because anyone has asked her to. Often quite colorful in her selections of the *hijab*, and always matched to her day’s attire, she believes it is a sign of modesty and humbleness. Naama’s quick wit has always compensated for her lack of formal education. Very selective about her household arrangements, clothes, and culinary specialties, Naama behaves similarly in her choices of TV programs. She knows precisely what she likes and dislikes.

Although the men in her family are fond of Al-Jazeera’s news coverage, she maintains that some of what airs is demeaning to her Islamic faith and can be construed sometimes to be outwardly blasphemous. “On some of the shows, they question the words of the Quran [the Muslim holy book] and the hadith [the Prophet Mohammed’s sayings],” she says. “Sometimes I can’t imagine what they are saying! What are they doing to our religion? I can’t believe it.” She knows precisely where she draws the line, something she thinks Al-Jazeera does not do. “I also think all these talk shows where people argue should be limited to politics, economic issues, and social stuff, but not religion. They should stay away from the sacred matters.”

But she does support other programs aired on Al-Jazeera. “Other shows are okay, especially the political ones.” Usually nonopinionated on political issues, Naama has, since Al-Jazeera,

grown more vocal. Kamal and Sherif say she now has an opinion on everything.

Kamal has said he is disheartened about his son’s involvement with the Arab activist groups. He had hoped his son would be apolitical. Kamal’s own experiences living in the Middle East taught him that questioning government authority could be extremely dangerous. Understandably, he would have concerns about his son criticizing Canadian foreign policy toward the Middle East. He had occasional nightmares about his son getting arrested. Opinionated in private, but reserved in public situations, Kamal was soft-spoken everywhere except within his inner circle of friends and family. He would share his opinions only behind closed doors. During his many years in Kuwait as a foreigner, the prospect of deportation was real and ever present. Having watched Kuwaiti and Iraqi television since their beginnings, he grew accustomed to the fact that opposition and dissent were punished. He can recall incidents when local newspapers would be shut down and journalists detained for expressing anything contrary to the government line.

It would seem natural that his son’s unchecked political protests would engender consternation in this stoic father.

When Al-Jazeera began its worldwide broadcasts, it took Kamal by more than surprise. Before then, Kamal, like most natives of the Middle East, was accustomed to the kind of brainwashing TV programming that Arabic television stations initially broadcast. All stations followed the same government position. It was only during times of conflict, as in the Lebanese civil war, or the Iraq-Iran War, that he sought news elsewhere, mainly through the radio. The BBC World Service Arabic radio, Voice of America (VOA), and the Middle Eastern Radio

Broadcast out of Cairo, and Radio Monte Carlo–Middle East were among the most reputable.

For Kamal, Al-Jazeera provided a dramatic contrast to his previous media exposure. He recalls the days of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (August 1990–February 1991), during which the local residents of Kuwait, who were reduced to a quarter of the country's original population, were exposed to Iraqi propaganda that was unparalleled in its fabrication of reality. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's daily *bayanaat* (announcements) on Iraqi TV would tell a story about the crisis that completely contradicted what the world heard from BBC, Voice of America, Middle Eastern Radio Broadcasting, and other Arab radio stations.

Iraq orchestrated an elaborate scenario and used its media to disseminate war propaganda. Once the Iraqi forces took control of Kuwait's telecommunications building, they replaced the existing service with their own. On the first day of the invasion, August 2, 1990, Kuwaiti residents watched a new broadcast, shabby and unconvincing.

Kamal recalls seeing a blank screen with handwritten lettering on a cardboard sign that read, "The Television of the Provisional Government of Free Kuwait." Even though the implication was that the broadcast was part of an interim independent Kuwaiti government, it didn't take the local audience long to realize that what was interim was the state of Kuwait itself. The illusion of a military coup led by Kuwaitis that toppled the existing monarchy was perpetuated on both Iraqi and Kuwaiti television. In an attempt to make the illusion believable, Iraqis aired coverage of Ala Hussein Ali, the supposed Kuwaiti army official who led the alleged coup. The makeshift news programming showed Saddam Hussein greeting and congratulating Ali.

Ali, who was also named prime minister, defense minister, and interior minister in the so-called provisional government of free Kuwait, announced a week later that Kuwait would be incorpo-

rated into Iraq and that he would become the deputy prime minister of the new expanded Iraq. As Kamal recalls, "I remember they had celebrations on television to commemorate the union between Iraq and Kuwait. They were unbelievable."

He also remembers some of the rhetoric the Iraqi government crafted to deceive its people and those living in Kuwait. "The union is like the 'return of the branch to the tree,'" explained Kamal. "Once the incorporation was complete, they started referring to Kuwait as the 'nineteenth province' of Iraq."

Part of the Iraqi rhetoric, according to Kamal, harkened to the superiority of the ancient Iraqi empire that once stretched from the area of Zakho in northernmost Kurdistan to the sea on the coasts of Kuwait. Thus, the "incorporation" of Kuwait, the only outlet to the sea, was considered a restoration of the age-old empire. Having been exposed to such deliberately blinding programming, it is no surprise that Kamal saw the advent of Al-Jazeera as a breath of fresh air.

The experiences of the Helal and Mounir families with Arabic television through the Arab eyes of Al-Jazeera are emblematic of a larger dynamic. Their experiences tell us something valuable about Arab audiences, wherever they may be, the histories behind their lives, the social and religious dimensions that inform them, and the relationships they have with their governments.

How does Al-Jazeera cater to the Arab audience and the issues that matter to it most? How has it changed the political landscape in the Middle East? How does Al-Jazeera maintain journalistic integrity in a region where covering the news objectively is nearly impossible?

The tensions experienced by Sherif, Arab audiences, Al-Jazeera's advocates, and critics are part of the Arab peoples' experience of globalization, migration, and emigration. Al-Jazeera is a major stakeholder in such processes.

Why is it that Arabs in Halifax, Cairo, Sydney, Toledo, and Amman cry together at the sight of a dead Palestinian boy? And, conversely, why are there so many enclaves of hostility among Arabs themselves? Al-Jazeera has successfully identified characteristics of the Arab audience that show similarities, as well as differences. By detecting and highlighting the links that connect Arabs worldwide, Al-Jazeera has become part and parcel of the Arab world. It speaks to and for it.

The connections that bind the 300 million Arabs in twenty-two countries are often abstract. It's not a military alliance, a political truce, an economic cooperative, or a simple linguistic tie. It may not even be reduced to a common religion. Instead, what brings Arabs together is a notion of joint destiny. As with the human nervous system, a single pinprick can be felt throughout the rest of the body. And somewhat like a body of water, where ripples spread and rebound across the surface, the Arab world can occasionally seem like a single entity. And although divisions of nationhood, religion, and economics are often pervasive, certain characteristics unify the Arab public mentality. Whether or not similarities represent a pan-Arab phenomenon is unimportant. Rather, the way in which we come to understand the Arab world from an insider's point of view can make a profound difference in international relations. More than any other time in recent history, there is a need for greater understanding between the West and the Arab world: What can be accomplished through collaborative political engagement among the regions of the world?

If there's any truth to the popular saying "we are what we watch," then to understand the Arab public we must venture into the Al-Jazeera TV news network. Such a unique look at the world through Arab eyes can open windows.

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A MAJOR LEAGUE CHANNEL IN A MINOR LEAGUE COUNTRY

On Sunday, October 7, 2001, Americans were glued to their seats as they watched an unfamiliar and sobering dose of real-life adversity unfold on their TV screens. Cable News Network (CNN) broke its regular coverage of the first day of the U.S. strikes on Afghanistan to broadcast a live feed from Al-Jazeera showing America's iconoclastic arch-nemesis, Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The man who has been accused by the U.S. administration of being the prime suspect behind the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington had his six and a half minutes of fame as he made his case to a worldwide audience—Western and Eastern, Muslim and Christian. His words, translated crudely by a stuttering interpreter, chilled Americans and other Westerners. For the first time in recent memory, the U.S. adversary was speaking directly to the U.S. public.

From that point on, the once-anonymous Al-Jazeera, the Arabic satellite TV news network, became a household name. With its exclusive broadcast of the first video footage of Osama bin Laden, Al-Jazeera had scooped the world. As the world's eyes fixed on Afghanistan, Al-Jazeera scored again with exclusive footage of U.S. strikes against Afghanistan. Its monopoly