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Al Jazeera Decides Against Showing Video Made by Gunman in Toulouse

By J. DAVID GOODMAN and DAVID JOLLY

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The video, by all accounts, is gruesome.

Recorded by a gunman in southwestern France

[<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/france/index.html?inline=nyt-geo>]

as he killed seven people at close range, and later sent to the satellite broadcaster Al Jazeera

[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/a/al_jazeera/index.html?inline=nyt-org]

by mail, the video captured a ruthlessness that shocked even hardened journalists accustomed to such disturbing images.

“Not like this — this is different,” said Salah Negm, a chief news director at Al Jazeera and among the ultimate arbiters for the news operation on broadcasting such footage.

As the police surrounded him during a nearly 31-hour standoff, the killer, Mohammed Merah

[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/mohammed_merah/index.html?inline=nyt-per]

], boasted to the authorities that his grisly recordings would soon be seen by the public. But on Tuesday the Qatar-based network decided that it would not be showing the videotaped murders, a ruling that some saw as a big shift for a station that had once been viewed in the West as a conduit for propaganda from Al Qaeda.

The decision, made at the very top of the sprawling international network, provided an opportunity for Al Jazeera to display its journalistic restraint at a time of management upheaval and accusations of a double standard in its coverage of uprisings in the Middle East.

Experts said Mr. Merah’s video offered a possible hint of the broadcaster’s future editorial direction.

“Al Jazeera is entering a new phase,” said Mohammed el-Nawawy, a professor of communication at Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina, who has written widely on Al Jazeera. “It’s hard not to see the correlation between the new management and the decision on that story.”

The network stressed that it had been guided by journalistic principles common to all news

organizations, saying that the video did not provide any news value. The decision, Mr. Negm said, was not a result of intense pressure from the French government, including an urgent plea from President Nicolas Sarkozy and an impending court hearing to stop the broadcast.

“The only factors are editorial,” Mr. Negm said. “Pressures, no, they don’t work. We don’t aspire to be politically correct; we aspire to be editorially correct.”

But experts said that the murky calculus involved in such determinations was even more complex for Al Jazeera, which has sought to shed a negative image still held by many in the West, who have come to see it as a repository for inflammatory content, including raw video of hostages in the years immediately after Sept. 11, 2001.

Mr. Merah, who was killed by the police in Toulouse, appeared to present his video as following in that lineage, giving it the title “Al Qaeda Attacks France.”

Zied Tarrouche, Al Jazeera’s Paris bureau chief, said he reviewed Mr. Merah’s video after it was received late Monday, and that it showed the seven killings with music, religious chants and the reading of Koranic verses in the background. “You hear the gunshots and the cries of the victims,” he said.

The video was sent to the bureau on a USB flash drive after the killings. It was accompanied by an unsigned letter in all capital letters written in “sometimes bad French” and purporting to be from Al Qaeda, Mr. Tarrouche said. It was immediately passed on to the police, he said.

The letter was postmarked last Wednesday, from Castelnau-d’Estrétefonds, 15 miles from Toulouse, the French media reported. That was the day Mr. Merah barricaded himself into his apartment after a predawn police raid, and French officials have expressed strong doubt as to whether he sent it himself. Mr. Merah’s older brother, Abdelkader, is in police custody, suspected of complicity with the attacks. Both men were under surveillance before the raids.

It is unclear whether the video was delivered elsewhere, but officials expressed fear that it could appear on jihadist Web sites.

Mr. Tarrouche said French prosecutors initially said they would not prevent a showing of the video, but later joined with victims’ families in seeking an urgent hearing before a Paris administrative court to stop the showing.

But Al Jazeera decided on its own not to show the video, prompting sighs of relief from many inside and outside the station.

“I was just thankful that they decided not to air it,” said Hassan Ibrahim, a journalist at Al Jazeera since 1996. “My feeling, and this was not the justification given by the network, is you don’t add fuel to fire. Yes, we know the man was a murderer. By publishing this video, you might create sympathy for a murderer.”

The network was criticized by the Bush administration during the Iraq war, and it has received further scrutiny from critics who complain that its coverage of the Arab Spring has

focused heavily on the brutal behavior of some authoritarian governments, like Egypt and Tunisia, while ignoring that of its Persian Gulf neighbors, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Those who perceived a double standard in coverage by Al Jazeera have pointed to a United States diplomatic cable, disclosed last year by WikiLeaks, that appeared to provide a glimpse of the network's interaction with the government in Qatar. The cable precipitated the resignation in September of the news director, Wadah Khanfar, who was said to have altered coverage of the Iraq war amid pressure from the United States and in consultation with Qatari officials.

The man who replaced him, Sheikh Ahmad bin Jasem al-Thani, is a member of Qatar's royal family.

The appointment of a director general with family ties to the ruling monarchy is troubling, said Hugh Miles, the author of a book on the network, who has followed its progress for nearly a decade. "He doesn't have any media experience at all," he said.

By showing restraint, the new management could be seeking to burnish its journalistic reputation and "show how responsible they can be," he said.

A spokesman for Al Jazeera said the editorial process was the same for any violent video received by the network.

"We're getting hundreds of them every day; most of them are from Syria," said the spokesman, Osama Saeed.

Before the management change in September, the network reached the opposite conclusion about another particularly brutal video when it decided to show video of Nigerian security forces executing members of the Muslim separatist group Boko Haram. That decision was reached over vehement objections of an executive producer in Washington, who later defied the management in Doha and removed the most gruesome portions from those programs of Al Jazeera under his control. A British television regulator found in 2010 that the video was too graphic and criticized the network for violating British broadcasting rules.

In his speech on Tuesday, Mr. Sarkozy expressed disgust with Mr. Merah's father, Mohamed Benalel Merah, for telling Agence France-Presse that he planned to bring charges against the French state for having killed his son.

"Should I remind this man that his son filmed his crimes and fiendishly made a point of sending the ignoble images to a television station?" Mr. Sarkozy said.

J. David Goodman reported from New York, and David Jolly from Paris. Scott Sayare contributed reporting from Paris.

* After Killings in France, Muslims Fear a Culture of Diversity Is at Risk

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/28/world/europe/in-toulouse-muslims-fear-diversity-is-at-risk.html>]

* French Authorities File Charges Against Brother of Gunman in Toulouse Killings

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/26/world/europe/french-officials-want-to-investigate-gunmans-brother.html>]

* Suspect Called French School Attack 'Improvised,' Spy Chief Says

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/24/world/europe/suspect-mohammed-merah-called-french-school-attack-improvised-spy-chief-says.html>]

* Crisis in Toulouse Alters Campaign's Tone in Sarkozy's Favor

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/23/world/europe/crisis-in-toulouse-alters-french-presidential-campaign.html>]

