

## **New York Daily News**

### **AL JAZEERA'S STATIC FADES SEEN AIDING FREEDOM**

By HELEN KENNEDY

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AS BUSH ADMINISTRATION officials congratulate themselves on signs of spreading freedom in the Middle East, some credit is being given to the network those officials branded an anti-democratic scourge: Al Jazeera.

The Arab satellite network despised in Washington for showing posturing terrorists, dead G.I.s and Iraqi civilian casualties has also aired galvanizing images of Iraqis and Palestinians voting, a Lebanese popular uprising against Syria and new-style elections in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

"If you want to get the domino effect, people have to see the dominoes falling," said Marc Lynch, a Williams College professor who is writing a book on how TV is rapidly changing the Arab world.

"Al Jazeera has been demonized, but people are starting to realize now that it can work in their favor, too."

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw raised some eyebrows yesterday when he attributed new changes to "the explosion of information through stations such as Al Jazeera and through the Internet."

Outgoing Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who once banned Al Jazeera from Iraq, also recently praised the Arab networks - without mentioning the most popular one - for carrying "the fascinating sight of real democracy at work."

Hugh Miles, author of a new book on Al Jazeera, said he has given talks to Washington officials and is seeing a warming toward the network. "There are people in the State Department and the CIA who are coming around to thinking they can be part of the solution," he said.

The network remains deeply unpopular among Middle Eastern rulers accustomed to fawning state-run TV. A dozen governments have cracked down on its reporters after being criticized on the air.

Iraqi blogger Ali Fadhil, who helped form the Iraqi pro- Democracy Party and is no fan of Al Jazeera, credits the station for spreading the message of freedom.

When Washington lawmakers fume about Al Jazeera broadcasting anti- American protests, for example, they miss the subtler message going out to millions of Arabs: Iraqis can demonstrate against their occupiers without being gunned down or jailed.

"They twist facts [and] favor conspiracy theorists, but in the end the audience gets more than one point of view and that's a crucial difference," Fadhil wrote.

Fadhil noted that Al Jazeera was the first Arab channel to interview Israelis, shocking viewers who had never seen an Israeli speak. "Al Jazeera opened a door that most people thought you can't knock on," he wrote.

Many analysts consider the Qatar-based network a greater catalyst for democracy in the Middle East than any U.S. policy.

"If you can get 50 people protesting with an Al Jazeera camera, it's more powerful than 50,000 without the camera," Lynch said. "It's changing Arab political culture from below: You can't hide things anymore."