

PROPHETS

IN THE LAND OF PROPHETS



TUNISIA

In a recent TED conference, Wadah Khanfar, director general of the Al Jazeera network, recalled a call on his personal phone. He did not know who was calling, or how he managed to get his number, but the voice was from a person in Tahrir Square in Egypt. The voice implored him not to switch off the cameras. "You are protecting us by showing what is happening here. If you switch off the cameras tonight, there will be a genocide."

Al Jazeera's cameras did not go off. They amplified the voice of all those protesters and broadcast it to the world. A revolution so unexpected that no one knew well how to interpret. The world was in a state of shock and taken completely by surprise. Al Jazeera's newsroom in Doha (Qatar) was soon flooded with pictures, with videos and news, most from people in the streets, who had become front-line reporters. The network was there to provide context, amplification and even protection for protesters seizing power from their oppressive regimes.



EGYPT

The world was watching: traffic to Al Jazeera's online broadcasts skyrocketed 2,500 percent, during the 18 days of the Egyptian Revolution, and roughly half of that traffic was from the United States. Ordinary people fighting to overthrow Hosni Mubarak discovered that ordinary people a world away actually cared. And then, as we were all watching this drama unfold, the spark also ignited in Libya, and then in other countries.

Well aware he was representing the voice of millions of Arabs, Khanfar in his TED conference asked the world to support the young generation that was taking the Middle East into a new era. "The future that we were dreaming for in the Middle East has eventually arrived" he said. He urged the West not to interfere and impose its will and interests on the region in an effort to establish governments that would be friendly to the West's economic and political interests. He asked that the West accept and support the choice of the Arab people.



LIBYA

Al Jazeera, is headquartered in Doha, Qatar. Over the years it has expanded to what it is today, a network with several outlets, including the Internet in multiple languages. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, provided a loan of QAR 500 million (\$137 million) to sustain Al Jazeera through its first five years. The Emir had been contemplating a satellite channel even before he deposed his father. A free press complemented his vision of the emirate as a center of commercial development and progress.

The network was launched in 1996, and even though it was financed in part by the Emir, the network was never about pleasing anybody, it soon was was shocking audiences and governments alike. It presented, for example, the Israeli speaking Hebrew on Arab television for the first time, and some talk shows were a constant source of controversy regarding issues of morality and religion.



BAHRAIN

Photos: AP, Getty, CIMDavid, 3arabawy, kjaoragaza.wordpress.com, Ramy Raouf



Wadah Khanfar

But Al Jazeera over the years seems to have finally earned the respect it deserved. It has endured and come a long way. With roughly 45 million viewers around the world today, the network once accused of having sympathy with extremist causes in the past is now invited to TED conferences.

But in what is perhaps the best compliment to date, and clear proof of how far Al Jazeera has come, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on 4 March 2011, saying: "Al Jazeera has been the leader, they are literally changing people's minds and attitudes. And like it or hate it, it is really effective (...) in fact viewership of Al Jazeera is going up in the United States because it's real news. You may not agree with it, but you feel like you're getting real news around the clock instead of a million commercials."

It is hard to be a prophet in your own land, but Al Jazeera's credibility has been hard earned. It wasn't out to be just another news channel, it never took the easy route, it struggled to remain loyal to the principles of true unbiased reporting. It has not been an easy ride, and mostly one it made alone, while being attacked from all sides. It was the lone voice that cried in the desert. After all, Al Jazeera does mean "the island" in Arabic.

Sources: ted.com, wikipedia.org, abcnews.com

Al Jazeera English newsroom

