



Arab Media Analysts on CBS Interview of Osama's Bodyguard

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SAN FRANCISCO — When “60 Minutes” aired an interview with Osama bin Laden’s former bodyguard on Sunday, American media may have broken taboos by giving voice to a member of Al Qaeda, but it didn’t break stereotypes, according to some Arab media analysts. Abu Jandal, who worked for bin Laden from 1996 to 2000, was interviewed by CBS correspondent Bob Simon in Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, in a four-hour interview. This wasn’t the first media appearance by Abu Jandal (as he was known in Al Qaeda). He made headlines in 2004 when he was interviewed by the Arab daily Al Quds Al Arabi of London. But it was the first time since 9/11 the mainstream U.S. media has interviewed someone who associated himself with the terrorist organization. The fact that someone belonging to Al Qaeda was even interviewed on U.S. network TV shows a change in today’s media climate, says Rami Khouri, editor at large of the Daily Star in Beirut. It is no longer a taboo to broadcast the perspective of enemies

of the United States, something that would have been unthinkable during the Vietnam War era, for example. “It is a change that reflects the changing times,” says Khouri. “You’re not negotiating with the enemy by interviewing them,” he adds. “It’s within the bounds of what is journalistically valid. At the same time, you don’t want to give them a propaganda platform.” But Jamal Dajani, director of Middle Eastern programming at Link TV, credits this change to technological advancements rather than political shifts. “Satellite TV culture and the Internet have made it much harder to prevent things like this,” says Dajani. “If CBS doesn’t air it, someone else will.” In an era in which “there is a free flow of information — even beheadings are broadcast on the Internet — the power of censorship has lost its grip,” he says. “The cat is out of the bag.” “During Vietnam,” Dajani adds, “you had to ship tapes back to TV networks. Today it’s in real time. We watched the invasion on Iraq from our living rooms because I was airing it from (Arabic TV news networks) Abu Dhabi and Al Jazeera.” Putting terrorists on TV sells papers and attracts viewers, says Dajani. Yet, he notes, the latest interview

with Abu Jandal was not covered in the Arab press. “Anything that happens around Osama bin Laden now makes for excitement for Western consumption, not from the Middle Eastern perspective.” Some Arab media analysts, however, say it is just the “same old, same old.” Still absent from U.S. coverage of the Middle East, they say, are the views and experiences of average people in mainstream Muslim society. The image of Muslims in U.S. media continues to be dominated by fundamentalists and terrorists, says Taleb Salhab, national outreach director of ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) in Dearborn, Mich. Airing a well-spoken fanatic is even more dangerous, says Salhab. “Those views don’t represent 95 percent of the Muslim world.” “It’s important not just to do superficial, entertaining interviews that might get higher ratings, but to probe more deeply into understanding terrorism and what’s behind it,” says Khouri, “U.S. culture has not dealt with terrorism accurately, and that has made it worse.” “The mindset of a terrorist is interesting,” adds Dajani. “But let’s focus on the real issues of how innocent people are affected.”

