

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB HEADLINERS LUNCHEON WITH
DIRECTOR GENERAL OF AL JAZEERA DR. MOSTEFA SOUAG

SUBJECT: THE FUTURE OF THE AL JAZEERA MEDIA NETWORK

MODERATOR: ANDREA EDNEY OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

LOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, HOLEMAN LOUNGE,
WASHINGTON, D.C.

TIME: 1:00 P.M.

DATE: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2018

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ANDREA EDNEY: [sounds gavel] Good afternoon, everyone. Good afternoon,
ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the National Press Club, the world's leading
professional organization for journalists. I'm Andrea Edney. I'm an editor with
Bloomberg News, and I am the 111th president of the National Press Club.

I'd like to ask you, if you haven't already, please take a moment right now to
silence your cell phones. If you are tweeting from today's luncheon, our handle is
@PressClubDC, and the hashtag for today's Headliners event is #NPCLive.

Before we start the conversation, I'd like to also acknowledge members of the
Headliners Team responsible for organizing this evening's event: Betsy Fischer Martin—
sorry, this afternoon's event. Betsy Fischer Martin, Lisa Matthews, Tamara Hinton and
Bill Lord, as well as Club staff Lindsay Underwood, Larua Coker and executive director
Bill McCarren. Thank you all for helping with us today.

I'd also like to extend a special thanks to my good friend and colleague, Jeff
Ballou, who is my predecessor, our most recent past-president of the National Press Club

and an editor with Al Jazeera; he is here to my right. So thank you, Jeff, for all that you have done and all that you continue to do. [applause]

Al Jazeera Media Network opened its doors in 1996 with the backing of the Amir of Qatar, and grew from one Arabic channel into what is now one of the largest news organizations in the world, with ten channels in multiple languages, broadcast to 310 million households in over 100 countries. The network has worked very hard over the years to build a reputation for speaking truth to power and channeling the voice of the voiceless.

Al Jazeera's rapid growth has been also marked with a remarkable series of highs and lows. Since its inception, the network has won nearly 200 awards across its different channels for coverage in the Middle East, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the US, the UK and elsewhere in Europe. Those honors include several Emmys. They also won one Emmy last night, just last night, for a documentary. Other awards have included a Peabody and the Overseas Press Association's prestigious Edward R. Murrow Award.

It has not been easy. Eleven of Al Jazeera's employees have been killed. Others have been harassed, expelled or imprisoned while doing their jobs of covering the news. It wasn't so long ago, for example, that Sudanese cameraman Sami al-Hajj was arrested as he crossed the border into Pakistan after covering the war in Afghanistan. He was shipped to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba as an enemy combatant. He was held there for more than six years before he was released.

In Egypt, several employees were arrested, sentenced and imprisoned, causing the network to swing into very public action and become a major player in the cause of press freedom. Journalist Mahmoud Hussein has been detained without trial in Egypt for more than 640 days.

The network has also had to battle charges of being too cozy or sympathetic to groups or countries who engage in acts of terror. Al Jazeera has furiously denied these charges, and we'll hear more about that today.

There have also been charges of editorial bias in multiple regions, which has led to some staff walkouts and varying degrees of suspension or other discipline in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Egypt, Bahrain and Syria.

Al Jazeera is at the center of a list of demands by member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, that it be shut down and charged as a propaganda tool of the Qatari government. It's also had to contend with efforts to force the network to register as a foreign agent here in the US, an act which cost the broadcaster its press credentials here.

Again, Al Jazeera refutes all such charges.

Leading the network through its most recent chapter is Acting Director General of Al Jazeera Dr. Mostefa Souag. Dr. Souag rose through the leadership ranks of the

network. Before joining Al Jazeera, he worked at the BBC World Service and the Middle Eastern Broadcasting Corporation.

Please join me in giving a very warm National Press Club welcome to Al Jazeera Media Network Director General Dr. Mostefa Souag. [applause]

DR. MOSTEFA SOUAG: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. Thank you, Andrea, for a wonderful introduction. I agree with all that you said. I could include it in my talk.

MS EDNEY: I'm glad that it was accurate.

DR. SOUAG: The 29th of September 1994, I arrived to London to join the BBC Arabic Television, an independent, very professional television. There was one problem there – the financier was a Saudi company, a private Saudi company. And when we joined the BBC, we were told – because we all said it doesn't work, this is not right – they said, "No, don't worry. We have a legal contract with a company, with this Saudi company, for ten years. So you are safe in your jobs here."

Eighteen months later, BBC Arabic Television was shut down because the Saudi government told the company, the private company that they have to stop it. They don't tolerate the fact that the BBC Arabic Television was presenting the opposition to the Saudi government or to some other governments allied with the Saudis. And they couldn't tolerate the fact that television was presenting reports and documentaries about the abuses of human rights in Saudi Arabia.

I mention this because it would be relevant a little bit later. Because the people who were trained, highly trained by the BBC, most of them joined Al Jazeera when it opened just a few months after the closure of the BBC. So they had a pool of professionals whom were recruited and really started Al Jazeera. Because a lot of people wonder, how could Al Jazeera be so professional just with Arab journalists? It was not done in the Arab world. This was, I believe, one of the secrets, in addition to the fact that the people who were recruiting the journalists recruited really the best ones from all over – in the Arab countries and in the West as well. Many Arab journalists were living in the West.

Now, Al Jazeera started the 1st of November 1996, and made a big something in the Arab world. Years later, years later, the ex-president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, visited Doha and came to visit Al Jazeera. Everybody at that time who came to Doha would visit Al Jazeera. And when he entered Al Jazeera, a friend of mine was actually the guide, was a senior producer there. He was the guide, he was showing him around. When he came to the newsroom, he looked and said, "I want to see Al Jazeera." They said, "Well, this is Al Jazeera." He looked and he said, "This is the matchbox that started all this fire?"

Now, this is an interesting actual statement because if Hosni Mubarak was a supporter of free media, professional media, he would have something like, "Is this the little candle that creates all this light?" But he saw fire because he's afraid of free media.

This is my reading of the story. And we can go on and on about these stories.

Now, in 2017, around May 2017, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, and joined briefly with Jordan, presented Qatar with 13 demands in order not to impose the blockade that you all know about. And one of them, very important for them, was shutting down Al Jazeera. Does that remind you of what happened to the BBC? That's why I mentioned the BBC here. They cannot support, they cannot tolerate free media. It's that simple.

The Egyptian government, after the coup d'etat, closed down our office and threw out all our reporters from there; the ones whom they didn't want to jail, of course, because they jailed many of them. And since then we haven't been able to work in Egypt. But in spite of the fact that we were out of Egypt, we have been covering Egypt and Egyptian events much more comprehensively than any other network, and more than any other channel. And the Egyptians themselves, from what we know, by the millions watch Al Jazeera to know what's going on or follow our dot.net and dot.com and our social media to know what's going on.

Al Jazeera is committed to professional media. And regardless of whether we are treated fairly, or unjustly like the case with Egypt or Saudi Arabia or whatever, we always keep our integrity. We keep our professionalism. We keep our independent. We don't follow anybody. We don't take orders from anybody. The editor-in-chief and the editors in the newsroom are the ones who make the decisions. This is, I believe, very important to mention.

Now, because of what Al Jazeera has been doing, because it has been doing its duties, it has been faced with so many problems. So many of our reporters have been killed; about 11 of them have been killed. Many have been jailed. Harassments by the hundreds. Families of our journalists are harassed in so many places. The way to prevent Al Jazeera from covering certain things are used many ways, many tricks. Like, they don't give you the accreditation. They give you the accreditation, they accept you, and then they don't give you a visa. They give you a visa and accreditation and when you get to the airport, they throw you out. Or you get there and then you cannot go to certain places. All the tricks that could be in a book of how to do it are used, in so many different countries.

In some countries, Al Jazeera is not allowed actually to work at all. Like in my own country, Algeria, since 2004 Al Jazeera is not allowed, not only not to open an office, but not even to send a reporter to cover elections, for example. And anybody who dare to work for Al Jazeera, if they are found out – I mean, there are people who do help Al Jazeera to do the job – they are threatened.

I remember one time, one guy who was working with the dot.net, not even going, directly sending his articles directly to the dot.net, Al Jazeera Arabic, but sending it through Paris, through a different way. Somehow, they knew about him. He received an email saying, "If you don't stop, you will be killed." And this is one example amongst many of them.

The kind of problems that we face, I will give you just a few. I started with Algeria; I'll tell you about Morocco, our neighbor. They had a problem with Al Jazeera because of the Western Sahara – "Why do you write Western Sahara? Why do you put a dotted line in what is internationally known as borders?" And we said, "All we do is follow the United Nations maps; we are not creating these maps. We cannot be with you or against you." No, for them, if you are not with them, you are against them.

Now with India, they have a problem with Kashmir. Same thing, about how to define the Kashmiri part of India, for example. Which we don't– we are not a part of the political dispute; we are just covering news and doing what we think is right.

So many issues. In Egypt itself, there's a problem between Egypt and Sudan about an area in the borders. Sudanese complain that "you make a mistake and you put the line here or there," and the Egyptians said the same thing.

We have so many of these issues. But this is just some, just to give you a taste, of what kind of things we are facing every day in our work.

Now, as I said earlier, Al Jazeera, like the BBC, like France 24, like Deutsche Welle, et cetera, we do receive the money from the state. They receive money from the state, too. It's public funds, et cetera. We do the same thing. But it's exactly like them. We have a complete independence, editorial independence. Nobody whatsoever interferes with Al Jazeera. I can tell you that I have been working for Al Jazeera since 2002; nobody ever told me what to do or not to do. The only guideline that we have is our editorial standards. They are known. They are exactly similar to what the BBC has or what CNN has, et cetera, and in some cases maybe it's even more strict. That's the only thing that the editors and the producers and the correspondents, et cetera, adhere to.

Nobody from the government – because this is an issue that I know probably you will ask that question, nobody from the government ever – and when I say ever, I mean it – ever called Al Jazeera to say, "You do this or you don't do this," or even, "Please, could you do this?" No. No contact whatsoever. And nobody in Al Jazeera, our reporters, our editors, have actually the right to contact them or to get contact from them. Except, of course, the foreign ministry might send us information about a certain event. Exactly the same thing that we see from the foreign office of the UK or from the State Department here, et cetera. Nothing different.

This is very important to keep in mind. I know it is not easy to believe that a country, a state gives you money to run a television station and then a network, an international network now, and don't ask for direct intervention in one way or another or

something. I know this is difficult to believe. But there are things of this kind that are difficult to believe.

If you don't mind, I will tell you a story that has nothing to do with the media, but it is relevant to how we sometimes find ourselves in a situation where it's difficult to believe. The story goes as follows:

A woman was living with her husband in a house beside a railroad. So every time the train goes by, it shakes the place and it was threatening especially one of her very important wardrobe.

MS EDNEY: Armoire?

DR. SOUAG: Armoire, yes. So she called a young carpenter in the neighborhood. She said, "Please, could you come and fix it?" When he came the husband was not there. So the young man looked, and he doesn't have a great experience, but he's willing to work. He said, "Madam, I really need to be inside the armoire when the train goes by in order to know exactly how things happen, so I know where the problem is." She said, "Go ahead."

So he went in and as he was sitting down there, the husband came back. And he just went straight away because he forgot something. Opened the armoire and he found the man there. He looked at him, said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Will you believe me if I tell you that I'm waiting for the train?" [laughter]

So the carpenter was telling the truth. But will you believe him? It's very difficult. So this is the kind of thing that I'm trying make the comparison. It's difficult to believe, but it is true.

When personally and my colleagues, when we heard that Qatar was going to start a television station called Al Jazeera, and it's going to be 100% free and independent, we all laughed and said, "A Gulf state would do such a thing? It's not possible." And I didn't join Al Jazeera at the beginning because of personal reasons – my kids were at school in Britain. But later on, I heard from my colleagues that actually the promise was real, and that they are really independent and free, et cetera. And we saw the job anyway; for a person like me and you who know the media, you don't need people to tell you what's going on. You can watch the content and decide for yourself. And this is what happened with me.

So when I joined in 2002, I remember I was the producer of a program called Current Affairs with a presenter friend of mine who graduated from Missouri school of media, and he was very good. So we knew we were free to do the program freely. The director of the channel at that time said, "Please, could you just tell me, write a small note, tell me what's the topic that you are going to discuss once a week? So if you don't find me, just shove the piece of paper under the door so I'll find it when I come in the morning." That's what we did.

And one day we came back and we found a piece of paper on our desk saying, "Please, look for a different topic." We were really mad and very frustrated and very furious. And when my friend, the presenter, came, we, together, went to the director's office very angry and said, "We are told that we are free to do our job here. How dare you interfere?" We said it politely, not this way, but that was the message. And he said, "What interference?" "You are telling us not to do what we wanted to do." And he said, "Yes, because the other program" – he mentioned the other program – "is doing the same thing. If you want to do it, go ahead, but you will be repeating the same thing. Even you are mentioning the idea; it's the same idea." We said, "Okay, sorry."

And that was the only time, actually. It never happened. It just doesn't happen. Sometimes yeah, I, myself, I was the director of the news for Al Jazeera Arabic, I was the director of the channel at one point. And whenever I knew that people are doing the same thing, I just tell them that, "Please, coordinate." You know how producers and presenters like to grab a topic that is hot, sometimes thinking that they are the first. But then it happened that they are not the first.

So these are the kind of things that we do. I believe our reporters, our editors can tell you about their experiences, if you have the chance to go. Whenever we have people who want to come to Al Jazeera, journalists who want to do reports or to do articles, students who want to do their internship or they want to do their dissertation, they come to collect information. We provide them with the information, of course, but moreover we tell them, "Listen, during your stay here, you have permission to get inside Al Jazeera buildings. You can go around any time, anywhere with nobody following you or supervising you. You are completely free here. And if you have a problem, please come to the management and we will solve it."

We don't control people. This is a part of our view, our way of doing things. It's not something that we claim; it's something that we do. And I'm just telling you this because I know there are questions in some people's mind about how independent our network is.

I have two or three papers, but I don't want to read them, really. I just want to tell you one thing that is very important, I believe. Freedom of the media is under great threat worldwide. And when I say worldwide, I know because I have reports even from the United States, from Europe, where— we used to think that this is the place. I mean, this is where free media is protected and we look up to the way things are done. So when we hear that there are threats to the media in these countries, imagine what our dictators in the Middle East, for example, what would they think if you tell them something and said, "In the West they are doing this"? Of course, in the West they might do something little, like this. In the Middle East, it would be killing, jailing, et cetera, et cetera.

So this is very important. That threat, how can we deal with the threat? No institution in the world, no media institution or organization that defends the press and the freedom of the press can do it by itself. We need to work together. We need to work

together, and Al Jazeera has done so many things in order to work together. We have tens of partnerships with media organizations, especially with human rights organizations, with defenders of media. And we work together in order to have samples[?] and to have conferences, et cetera, where we can tell people about those threats and tell people about how to deal with them.

Well, how to deal with them? Very honestly, it's not an easy answer. There's no easy answer. One, government is adamant about punishing the messengers; one, the government is adamant about punishing anybody who reveals things that they don't want to be revealed because they are afraid; one, they don't like people to be aware of what's going on in their own countries. What do you do with them? They have the police and they have the army and they have the justice department because, in the Middle East, for example, the judges – most of the time, maybe not all of them – implement whatever the mukhabarat, secret service or the police, tell them to do. It's obvious.

I mean, there are some issues that there's no way that any judge would sentence people, for example, to death sentence for somebody who is not even on edge of doing anything that would touch the security of the state. Yet, they are sentenced to death. So in courts where 600 people are sentenced to death in less than one hour, just mass sentencing, how do you expect the legal system to do something right for you?

So what we need to do is to work together. I suggested more than one time, and my colleagues suggested certain ways of dealing with it. But you need solidarity. You need understanding. You need to know that if you don't defend, if you don't defend the press, freedom of the press now, especially in situations like Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera is not the only one, but I'm talking about Al Jazeera because that's my responsibility. If you don't defend them, if you don't be in solidarity with them, one day it might get to you.

Again, there's a story in Arabic from Kalila wa-Dimna about animals where the lion wants to eat these two very strong, big bulls, one white and one black. Every time he goes and tries to get them, they stand together; he ran away. One day he had to think about a way to do it, so he went to the black one and said, "Listen, you are the strongest one. So if you let me get the white bull, then you will be the king among your, whatever, cows and colleagues." And the guy said, "Yeah, sure, go ahead." So he went ahead and actually got the white bull. Ate it. And after a while, he came to the black one. "Hello, it's your time." The black one understood and he said, "I was eaten the day the white one was eaten."

This is what happens. If you don't stand from the beginning with what is right, with what is needed for our profession, then we are going to be all sorry. We need to do that. We have to think, regardless of what, that journalism is not a crime. That's a hashtag that we have done, protest, many times and got more than two billion people who actually approved it.

There are so many details. Maybe it comes in the question-and-answers. Thank you very much for listening. Thank you for the introduction and for the opportunity. Thank you, everybody, for being here. [applause]

MS EDNEY: Can you talk a little bit about the challenges of covering Arab countries and the Middle East versus covering the US? How do those differ? And what are the similarities?

DR. SOUAG: Let me start with the easy one. Covering the US is, of course, a much easier thing to do. As I believe yesterday in the talk, the Kalb Report, there was talking about, for example, some of the problems with the President here because he actually assaults sometimes the media. But he didn't put anybody in jail. Or at least not as far as I know. And nobody was killed. There were some small incidents, maybe as a result of hate speech or whatever, but our reporters here, Abdul Rahim, Nasser, and all our people here, can go anywhere and they report freely.

If they meet a certain problem sometimes, I believe they can resolve it because there is a system that controls this issue. There is also, if we get to the point where we need, for example, to go to justice, to the court, there's also an independent court, which doesn't exist in the Middle East in general. Very few countries have very few courts that are more or less independent. Independence is a big word. They are not.

So in the Middle East, as I said earlier, here, we have no problem getting the visa for our journalists, giving the accreditation. Yeah, once in a while maybe somebody wouldn't get a visa, but for a different reason, not because of his journalism and his mission in the United States, but for something else – he's from a country that is with a question mark, passports usually do, this kind of thing.

Now, in the Arab world, as I said, you start with countries who don't allow you at all to work. Like I mentioned Algeria. Countries where now you are not allowed to work, like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Emirates, Egypt, et cetera. So that's no problem. But if you are allowed to work there, there are places, countries where they tell you, "You can go this far." For example, around the capital, but you can't go outside the capital except with special permission. I don't have to name names, but people know who they are. Or they tell you there are certain events that you cannot cover; you don't get permission to do it.

Again, sometimes you get there and you are not allowed to enter, even though you have a visa and you have accreditation. And if you are caught doing it without, then they will, I don't know, they will consider you a terrorist, a threat to the security of the country, all these kind of things.

And of course, there are now, in addition to the threats by the government, by the police, by the army, by whatever, the secret services in these countries, in certain countries there are threats of the militias, of the armed groups. They don't take you to jail; they usually kill you. And many of our reporters, some of our reporters were killed, in Syria, for example, by snipers from the government and by the armed groups.

So if, as I said, I believe, a little bit earlier, if journalists don't feel safe, it's very difficult for them to do their job. And in certain cases, they might even start self-censoring themselves. And we don't want that to happen. That's why usually when somebody says, "I am threatened, I'm in danger," we tell him get out of there. We bring him to Doha, send him somewhere else. We don't keep him in that same place. Something happened with two people in the last three months, two people we had to move from Yemen to Doha because they were threatened; they were told they would be killed.

And these are just some of the problems, but there are many, many problems. You can write books about this.

MS EDNEY: How do you prepare reporters to go work in those volatile, dangerous environments?

DR. SOUAG: Al Jazeera actually has a very serious program to train all our journalists on how to deal with areas that have tension, war, problems with Al Jazeera, where gangs are dangerous, et cetera. Nobody's allowed actually to go and cover war zones or tension zones without going through the training. The trainers are from Al Jazeera and from international trainers. We've got trainers from Germany, from France, from all over, America, et cetera. That's a very important thing.

The second thing, we also don't think only about the safety of our journalists, which is a prime concern for us, but we also think about the safety of people whom they are covering or the way our reporters deal with them. So for example, how do you deal with somebody who is injured, or somebody who is imprisoned, or somebody whose family was killed or something? So we also teach our reporters how to deal with them from a human rights perspective and from a legal perspective.

And so on and so forth. You have to understand that Al Jazeera is the only, as far as I know, is the only network in the world that has a whole center called the Al Jazeera Center for Liberties and Human Rights. All its job, the only job that they do is to follow what's going on with human rights and report them, especially the abuses, the reports from international organizations, et cetera, but also to deal with our reporters, to teach them, to bring them up to the highest standards in terms of dealing with war zones, for example.

So they come actually to Doha, our reporters, from all over the world, they come in groups and they go through the training, theoretical, and then they go to the field where we create actually an environment where they learn how to deal with arms, with explosions. I don't believe that there is another program like that. And that's what we do.

MS EDNEY: Do you believe that there are more risks in working for Al Jazeera than for another media company?

DR. SOUAG: I think that the risks are there. If you go through the reports by the international organizations, like Reporters Sans Frontières, for example, or the IPI, you can see that reporters and journalists are threatened. And there are so many of them that are killed, jailed. For example, I mentioned that 11 people have been killed who worked for Al Jazeera, have been killed in the last 22 years. But there 100 journalists being killed a year; the average is a 100. Sometimes 150, sometimes 70; the average is 100 reporter are killed. Jailed; there are many, many reporters jailed in so many countries. You take, for example, Egypt is one country, Turkey is one country, China, I mean, Russia, et cetera.

So the threat is there. But if you are known to be from Al Jazeera, and you work in one of those countries or around those countries, where Al Jazeera is really feared, like in the Arab world, then you might be actually at risk a little bit more. But the risk is there, everywhere. People who are killed, not from Al Jazeera, in Egypt, they were killed in many other places, in Yemen, et cetera; reporters from Reuters in Myanmar, for example, they are in jail, two of them, et cetera.

So I believe that Al Jazeera is targeted more, but especially to prevent it from doing the job. But in terms of physical risk, I believe maybe Al Jazeera a little bit more. But I think the risk is there for everybody. And that's why we need to work together. And again, how do we work together? That's why we need maybe a conference, maybe we need a workshop to discuss actually with all the relevant organizations or companies to work a strategy to maybe counter this thing without losing our professionalism.

MS EDNEY: Should that conference include representatives from the governments? Because often it is the government that influences whether a reporter is arrested or allowed to go freely into an area.

DR. SOUAG: It's not something that I have thought thoroughly about it, but I think the governments have to be included at one point. But before that, I think the media has to create its own strategy in order to be able to face the governments. Because when the governments come, when the government representatives come to such a workshop or such a conference, they come very well prepared. If you take the Arab world, governments that you see, they are in dispute with each other. And from outside you think they are enemies. You know, the one ministry, the ministries that work together? The ministry of interiors; they always work together and they have meetings, regular meetings, even when they are enemies. The borders between Algeria and Morocco are closed and they are considered enemies. But the ministers of interiors, they are friends; they work together.

So if you want to do something serious, you need a strategy, you need a plan, and then you bring them to tell them, This is our plan and we would like you to cooperate.

MS EDNEY: Do you think it is truly possible for so many media organizations across the region to come together and agree on even a simple process or approach?

DR. SOUAG: I don't think so. I think that when I talk about the media getting together, I'm not talking about just the region; I'm talking about worldwide media institutions. We need to work together. Al Jazeera, CNN, BBC, Deutsche Welle, et cetera. But we will try to include some of the Middle Eastern, for example, who take the Middle East, some of the Middle Eastern institutions that are more or less independent. Because many institutions in the Middle East, many media institutions – newspapers, radio, television, social media, et cetera – are actually a mouthpiece for the government propaganda. They actually, in Egypt, there are so many programs on the Egyptian television channels, different channels who call for the killing of journalists and for the killing of opposition. How can you discuss this with them? Many of them are very well known to be agents, high-ranking agents of the security.

So yes, I think those people have to cooperate, have to be in certain workshops or something, just to tell them, Listen, you need to be professional, you need to give up the other job. Because it's another job for them; they get more money for it and work as a journalist. Yeah, with anybody who is actually a professional journalist, yes, I think they should be included in any kind of gathering or study that's being done that way.

MS EDNEY: How do you respond to charges that Al Jazeera is too cozy or broadcasts too much, gives too much coverage to terrorists or terrorist activities?

DR. SOUAG: You see, this is one of the, I believe, misinformation, disinformation, misunderstanding, call it whatever you like, that is going around in so many countries. Let's assume you have a problem. The Americans now, the American government and maybe a [49:43] of the American people have a problem with Iran, right, because Iran is developing a nuclear capability. Whether it's true or not, that's the case. If you cover the— okay, and the Trump administration wants to, or they decided to get out of the agreement with Iran, right? The Europeans don't. If you here in America, CNN, ABC, whatever, presented the European perspective on this issue, will that be wrong because they are not going along with what the government is doing? Let's assume that they present the Iranian perspective. Would that be wrong? Isn't that their business, to tell people what every corner of the issue, how they think about things and what they do in order for the people to understand, and then take an educated decision, not a decision that is based on propaganda.

This is what Al Jazeera has been doing. Al Jazeera has been providing people with knowledge in order for them to make an educated decision about their lives. And this is why governments in the Middle East are afraid of Al Jazeera. Because they don't want people to know or to learn; to learn about their human rights, for example, et cetera.

So when we cover so-called terrorism, because terrorism is, as you know, is a term that is actually not defined internationally. And the American government is one of the countries, one of the governments that is not willing to define the term "terrorism." So when somebody uses the word terrorism, you have to take it from our perspective, you have to take it with caution. The BBC doesn't accept that word; actually, they put it usually between quotation marks because that's not objective.

Now, I might agree with you completely, that such-and-such an organization is a terrorist organization, but I don't have the right to deprive you from knowing what this organization is thinking about. You need to know what they are doing, what they are thinking about. And actually, that is good for security and good for the profession itself. We are talking about not to get involved, our own convictions get involved with our business, with our job.

Al Jazeera has never done anything that other professional media institutions don't do. A lot of people talk about how come we presented bin Laden. CNN presented bin Laden. They were dying to get tapes from bin Laden. And there was nothing wrong. I'm saying that this is actually professional. So what's the problem? Presenting bin Laden to people is to demystify this guy who is threatening the world. It's not to glorify him; actually, it's not. This is one thing that we need to think about.

Al Jazeera does the same thing with other people. We always challenge them. We never give them a platform. And whenever these so-called terrorist leaders do something on Al Jazeera, we never allow anything from their speech that calls for violence or calls for killing, whatever. We don't. We just want to know what is the thinking behind what they are doing. Because that's important for people to know.

MS EDNEY: Can you please give us an update on the pressures that Al Jazeera has come under from some members of US Congress to register as a foreign agent with the US Department of Justice?

DR. SOUAG: As you know, there are about, I think, nine – originally there were about nine or ten Congressmen who started a letter and then were joined by a number, maybe nine or so; I think the whole thing were about 17, if I'm not wrong – who asked the Justice Department to look into Al Jazeera to see if Al Jazeera is a foreign agent. Now, what does a foreign agent mean? I think in the aftermath of what happened with Russia and all the issue with the Reagan– I'm sorry, I'm from the time of Reagan; I was here when he was elected so I still think of him. With Trump, the interference. Maybe the national security feels that it is very important to know who is actually trying to harm the United States, trying to undermine the United States security. And that is completely right; of course they have to do this kind of thing.

But Al Jazeera is completely independent. We have no government control whatsoever. Whatsoever. And as I said earlier, our reporters have no right to contact or to be contacted by anybody from the government, except with what I said earlier, if we get information about a certain event or something.

So that means that we are not concerned with the FARA because we are not like some other institutions that might be agents of other countries. Al Jazeera is not. Up till now, that was a call by the Congressmen, whom we respect, of course, and they have to think about the security of their country. I have no problem with that. But if anything happened that would lead to an investigation by the Justice Department, we are

completely confident that they will find us to be completely far away from any government pressure or from any government interference in our job, and that we are practicing the highest standards of the profession.

MS EDNEY: Have you received indication that there would be a government investigation, a DoJ investigation?

DR. SOUAG: Well, again, the issue is with our counselors, they deal with it. Because we cannot follow this issue here. I mean, we are in Doha and our office is busy with daily reporting, et cetera. But we do have counselors here who are dealing with the issue. And if there is something, then people would know about it when the Justice Department announced it.

MS EDNEY: Do you submit a budget? How does your funding work? How does that process work?

DR. SOUAG: Actually, at this moment, we are working, from now till about November, we are working on the budget for 2019. That's what we do, around September or October, we start working on the budget.

What do we do? We ask every department, every channel, for example, and they have to deal with the different sections, the different departments in every channel, to submit their needs for 2019, based on their projects, whatever they want to do, the events that are going on in the world. For example, in Washington they said, Well, this is the year for election, so we need extra money, et cetera.

So when we collect all of them, they go to the finance department, and the finance department collects everything and put them in nice order so we can understand it, because it's too much, and they bring it to the budget committee. The budget committee is made of a number of EDs, executive directors, and I am the president of that budget; the director general is the president. It's not a person, it's the position.

And then we go through it and we will see. If we are convinced with the needs, quite often we say, Well, this is not needed. Or, for example, now that we are having some cuts in our budget, we say, This is not urgent, it could wait till the year after, or the year after. For example, the project department might come and say, "We would like to build a new building for HR." I say, "No, we have a building for HR now. It's not great, but it's fine, you can work there." And that's how it works.

Then when the budget is finalized by the budget committee, then the report would be prepared and given to the board of directors. When it's approved, they send it to the ministry of finance. The minister of finance might agree and give us what we ask for, and might say, "No, sorry, you have to cut it by 20% or 30% because we don't have the money for you." And we have to go over it again, take a look at it, and see where it's possible to cut. And we do that.

We don't get an open-ended budget. We get a budget that is very tight, that is very scrutinized. And in spending it, we have the audit actually who are the members of the audit team who are very serious about the job and they look into every penny, where it was spent. Actually, they go to every office, including the Washington office – she is smiling because they have some of them, I believe, or they had some of them here, right here in Washington, looking into the books, et cetera – and that's what happens.

When we get the budget, of course, if there is a cut, then we have to look into our priorities, where we can make those cuts that the ministry of finance made, where we can make them. It could be– we usually make our core business the priority.

MS EDNEY: And the ministry of finance doesn't make a suggestion, which departments or areas you should make the cuts?

DR. SOUAG: No, listen, they don't even know what departments. They just look at the number and they say, "Listen, we cannot give you this number this year. We don't have this money." And of course, sometimes we discuss it with them, they might add a little bit, 5% or something. But generally speaking, when we get it, we have to redistribute according to our needs and our priorities. Our priorities are what we produce, the content that we do; so, our journalists, our newsroom, et cetera. And then comes projects or whatever, anything else; that is secondary.

MS EDNEY: So we are coming up close on time. I have just a couple more questions. So I think I'm going to ask you three more questions, and I could ask you to be brief and concise with your answers, that would be phenomenal, and then we can ask all of them. So one, there was a four-part documentary that Al Jazeera did on Israeli lobbying in the US, including allegations of Israeli spying on American citizens. This is said to be suppressed by the Qatari government after pressure from Israel. Is that a documentary that is going to be shown? Can you tell us what is happening there?

DR. SOUAG: First of all, let me reiterate again that the government of Qatar doesn't interfere in our job. We have never – and again, I challenge anybody who can prove the opposite – never been contacted by the government of Qatar to tell us to put on screen or not put on screen of the work that we do. That's number one.

Second, the documentary was produced, it's true, but there were some issues with it. And we decided to go through those issues, editorial and legal, before we can actually schedule it. It has never been canceled; it is delayed.

MS EDNEY: Pending.

DR. SOUAG: Pending. And by the way, I know that somebody claimed that he talked to, he or they talked to the Amir of Qatar and he promised them not to allow this thing to– the decision about this documentary was done long before that visit, that claim that they told the Amir about it. And certainly, the Amir never contacted us or anybody from his office to tell us what to do or not to do.

The question is that in some cases, in the Arab countries in general, not just in Qatar – Qatar is a goal[?] for the Arab countries – people are sometimes polite. If you ask them something, they don't tell you no; they say, "We will look into it." "We will look into it" means, "Please, don't ask more." But that's it.

So what happened, I have no direct knowledge of what happened between the Amir and the person who claimed that he talked to the Amir about it, but I can tell you, 100%, that the decision about the film was done internally, and the film has never been considered to be canceled. It's just delayed to make sure that what we are doing is right.

The same thing happened with the one that we did in England. And that's why when it was broadcast and some people took Al Jazeera to Ofcom, complaining that Al Jazeera was not balanced and was not this, as you have seen yourself, on every account Ofcom found Al Jazeera to be professional, to have done the right job. And the same thing will happen, inshallah, when we put that film here in America.

MS EDNEY: I have one more serious question and then one–

DR. SOUAG: Serious, and the rest are not serious? [laughter]

MS EDNEY: And then one not-so-serious question. So the serious question is, in brief, Al Jazeera is coming up on its 22nd birthday. In brief, over those 22 years, what do you view as your major accomplishment?

DR. SOUAG: Oh, we have so many major accomplishments. I would say that putting the profession that is journalism, professional journalism on the map in the Middle East for the first time.

MS EDNEY: That is quite an accomplishment. Very succinct. So I have a small gift for you, and I have one more question. So first, I'd like to present you with a mug from the National Press Club. We present this mug to each of our esteemed speakers, and we hope that you will use it long and well in good health.

DR. SOUAG: Inshallah, thank you very much. [applause]

MS EDNEY: So I have one final question here; it's actually kind of a two-part because I need to ask you if one thing is true, I don't know. My understanding is that al Jazeera in Arabic means island, is that correct?

DR. SOUAG: The island, al Jazeera. And I have to tell you– do you want the explanation about it?

MS EDNEY: Do we have time here in the audience?

DR. SOUAG: No? Okay. It means the island, yes.

MS EDNEY: How about one sentence to explain why the island?

DR. SOUAG: The island for us, we're considered an island of freedom of the media. In the Gulf, al Jazeera is, they call it, it's a peninsula. The whole area is called Jazeera al Arabiya. So it depends on what you take. We prefer the island of free media.

MS EDNEY: Freedom of the press. So along with that theme, if you were stranded on a desert island, what three things would you like to have you? And that's our final question.

DR. SOUAG: This mug full of water. [laughter]

MS EDNEY: Yes! Very good. Two things. That's all you need. Thank you so much for being here today. [applause] Thank you very much.

DR. SOUAG: Thank you.

MS EDNEY: Before everyone leaves, I'm going to take one more minute of your time to tell you about some of our upcoming Headliner events. On Friday, we have a breakfast; MSNBC's Steve Kornacki will be here talking about his book, *The Birth of Political Tribalism*. Next week, on Monday, we have a Headliners Newsmaker with US Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. And coming up later this month, we have a luncheon with National Air and Space Museum Director Dr. Ellen R. Stofan.

DR. SOUAG: If you allow me just one—?

MS EDNEY: Please.

DR. SOUAG: Since I got this from you, actually I brought a book of Al Jazeera's 20th anniversary. It's a book, it's nice. I brought it for you and for the World Affairs Council, one for each. And I would like to bring to you, but I was told not to bring them during this event. But it would be, I hope it would be a good reading for the members who want to read about Al Jazeera from our reporters, from the people who have been working on Al Jazeera or the people who have been affected by Al Jazeera. So many of them. And so, I hope it will be good reading.

MS EDNEY: We would be happy to include that in our library. Thank you.

DR. SOUAG: However, since you gave me time, I would like, again, to actually thank Bill McCarren who actually did, I don't know where he is now—

MS EDNEY: Our executive director, executive director of the National Press Club.

DR. SOUAG: He has been fantastic. I love hosts like him. He takes care of everything and you feel comfortable and you feel like he's your father or brother, trying to take care of you. Thank you very much, Bill.

And at the same time, Dr. Shank, really wonderful, thank you very much. And of course, his Excellency, the Congressman Jim. And of course, you. You have been wonderful in your presentation.

MS EDNEY: Thank you very much for being here with us today. We hope to see you again here at the National Press Club. [applause]

DR. SOUAG: Thank you very much.

MS EDNEY: And with that, we are adjourned. [sounds gavel]

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