

# Al Jazeera helps shape political identity of Arabs, study finds

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Residents of the Middle East who are heavy viewers of Arab television news networks like Al Jazeera are more likely to view their primary identity as that of Muslims, rather than as citizens of their own country, a new study suggests.

Because networks like Al Jazeera are transnational – focusing on events of interest across the region rather than those in any one country – they may encourage viewers to see themselves in broader terms than simply residents of a particular nation, the researchers said.

"The goal of these relatively new networks is not to represent specific national interests, but to appeal to audiences across the region," said Erik Nisbet, lead author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"They tap into the idea that all viewers are connected through a Muslim or Arab identity."

The findings have important implications for the United States as it develops its foreign policy related to the Middle East, Nisbet said.

It is particularly significant because other research suggests that Arabs who identify themselves primarily as Muslim have a more unfavorable view of the United States than are those who see themselves chiefly as [citizens](#) of their country.

"Arabs who define themselves first and foremost as [Muslims](#) don't necessarily have the same interests, preferences and perceptions as do those who adopt a national identity," he said. "They might view the United States differently."

Nisbet conducted the study with Teresa Myers, a postdoctoral researcher in communication at Ohio State. Their results appear in the November 2010 issue of the journal *Political Communication*.

The researchers used data collected between 2004 and 2008 by Zogby International and Shibley Telhami, a professor at the University of Maryland. Telhami and his colleagues conducted surveys of 14,949 residents across six Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates.

For this study, Nisbet and Myers focused on survey questions involving Arabs' use of transnational media, political identity (Muslim, Arab or national), and demographic controls, including education.

For television use, the researchers examined how many days per week participants viewed various transnational channels, and which ones they chose as their favorites. Their emphasis was on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, the two dominant networks in the region that presented an Arab perspective on the news.

The findings showed that, the more days a week that participants said they viewed Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya, the more likely they were to claim "Muslim" as their main political identity, rather than their national identity. (The strongest effects in the study involved a "Muslim" identity rather than an "Arab" identity.)

The researchers also found interesting effects of education in the study, particularly as it interacted with media use.

All else being equal, people with higher levels of education were more likely to claim a national identity – to say they were Saudi Arabian rather than Muslim, for example.

That makes sense, Nisbet said, because "education is one of the primary means of political socialization.

"When you go to government-run schools, you learn loyalty to the state."

However, that changes the more people watched channels like Al Jazeera.

"At the highest levels of media use, there is virtually no difference between the most and least educated participants concerning their political identity – they are all much more likely to claim a Muslim identity," Myers said.

"Media use overpowers education when it comes to claiming a political identity."

Nisbet and Myers also considered the possibility that people who had a strong Muslim identity were simply more likely to watch Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, rather than the other way around. But their findings suggest that isn't the case.

Along with asking how often participants watched various channels, the surveys also asked them to name their two favorite channels to watch. People with a strong Muslim identity may be expected to say Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya were their favorite channels. But the study found that even people who listed other channels as their favorites still were more likely to claim a Muslim identity, if they were heavy viewers of Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya.

"It seems that just being exposed to these channels is associated with a greater chance of a Muslim identity, even if you say you prefer other channels, Myers said.

Nisbet acknowledged that this is not the best way to determine if viewing Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya is likely to lead to claiming a Muslim identity. It would be better if researchers could follow the same people over time to see how their identity changes as a result of their TV viewing choices. But such data is not available, and the survey used in this study is the best available.

In the meantime, these results suggest that the popularity of Al Jazeera may pose challenges for the United States, if the network continues to influence viewers' political identity.

"If there's a growing transnational Muslim identity, the United State will have to reevaluate traditional foreign policy strategies that are currently based on dealing with individual countries," Nisbet said. "It will make diplomacy more complex."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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