



Colloquy

*Covering Egypt's revolution
and Al-Jazeera's success*

**Ayman
Mohyeldin**

** Ayman Mohyeldin is a Foreign Correspondent for NBC News based in Egypt. He has previously worked for Al-Jazeera, NBC and CNN. He is best known for his 18 day coverage of the Egyptian revolution for the pan-Arab English-language network, Al-Jazeera.*

The entire world fixed its gaze on the 31 year old reporter who was experiencing a historic journey with the Egyptians who flocked into Cairo's Tahrir Square earlier this year, to demand the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who ruled the Arab country with an iron fist for three decades.

Mohyeldin was a student in the U.S in the summer of 2000, when the Middle East was burning amid the second Palestinian intifada. He went to a barbecue party with one of his friends, where he met an NBC producer.

They discussed a wide range of issues, including Palestine. The producer told Ayman that he had some very interesting insights, and whether he had ever thought of going into journalism.

Ayman's response was negative.

The NBC producer told him to send along his resume, and that they would try to work something out. After six months, Ayman started working for the NBC, in a position just above an internship.

"It was a very basic entry-level job. In the morning, I would come in at 6 a.m., read the newspapers and do administrative tasks. At the time, I was going to night school, and so it was a very convenient job- nothing very exciting."

As it did for many Americans, 9/11 changed Mohyeldin's life and career.

There were tremendous opportunities in journalism to work on projects that had to do with understanding 9/11. The 9/11 terrorist attacks opened a lot of doors to Mohyeldin that otherwise would have remained closed, he says. "I was looking for investigative reporting roles. Even though I was doing a very basic job, I was involved in high level, very professional journalism."

"It was a very rewarding job, involving both language and cultural skills. I had found myself working in a branch of the news business, which was focused on what was happening in the Arab, Islamic and broader contexts. Because of my cultural orientation and my language skills, I found myself with a lot of good opportunities at a young age. I did that with NBC News, and then the following year, President George W. Bush started talking about invading Iraq. The focus of the entire press community shifted to Iraq. I left NBC and went to CNN, preparing for what was about to happen in Iraq. No one knew what would happen during the war. But everyone had some kind of intuition, and news organizations were launching their operations, setting up and bringing in more staff."

Despite his experiences in Gaza and Iraq, Mohyeldin has come to the attention of the international community through his fascinating coverage of the Egyptian revolution earlier this year.

“The anger inside Egypt was very much about change, and Al-Jazeera was focusing and carrying those feelings to the international audience,” he says, adding that the pan-Arab broadcaster was pro-people.

He had been touted as one of the most successful Western journalists as a result of his earlier reportage from Iraq, Gaza and Libya before he appeared before the audience of Al-Jazeera English to deliver breaking news on the rapidly unfolding events in Cairo. With hundreds of thousands of people behind him chanting slogans heralding a new Egypt, Mohyeldin had soon become what many call the “face of the Egyptian revolution.”

His task was not easy. He complains of a series of official measures against Al-Jazeera in January by the Egyptian government. Al-Jazeera’s license was eventually revoked; it was taken off the satellite broadcast service; its equipment was confiscated; staff were arrested.

“There was a lot of pressure on Al-Jazeera,” says Mohyeldin.

“We anticipated that the government would react like that. We made a decision to try to keep members of our team separate, so that if one person was arrested, somebody else would still be able to report. It was very important for us to have numerous positions. At one point, in Cairo alone, we had at least six correspondents, a staff cameraman, and a producer. With Al-Jazeera Arabic, the number

was even higher. We had people all across the country reporting the revolution. When the government started to crack down, we realized that we were going to face serious problems, and would have to relocate our team and find opportunities to report from somewhere else. That was our goal. We kept our cameras in Tahrir Square, which became the focal point, where people gathered every day. Maintaining a constant presence in Tahrir Square is what we were trying to do throughout the duration of the events,” he says, demonstrating the degree of risk he undertook for his work.

He likely exaggerates the extent to which a media outlet can help to restore order and to avert potentially devastating outcomes, but Mohyeldin believes that the presence of Al-Jazeera in Libya – during the early periods of the uprising – would have changed the government’s treatment of protesters, or as they are now known, rebels.

“If this massacre was going to unfold in full view of the international media, if people were going to see that Libyan army was killing people with helicopters and machine guns, then the [Libyan] government would have behaved differently,” he says, noting that there was nobody watching in February, when the Libyan uprising began. “They were able to do this essentially unobserved, and this, I think, is the real tragedy,” he emphasizes.

Mohyeldin was one of few present in Tahrir Square almost every single day of the 18 day uprising, absent only when he was briefly detained by the Egyptian authorities. He believes that the Egyptian revolution came about as a result of a combination of

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many things, rather than a single discontent that led to the overthrow of the regime.

“The Egyptian revolution was unique because it was leaderless, popular, and organic,” he contends, claiming that the revolution came from the people themselves.

“It was not someone in exile banging the tune; in Egypt the revolution was organic and popular, no single individual, party, or leader could claim that they alone triggered the revolt,” notes Mohyeldin.

According to the reporter, the factors that led to these revolutions have been widely reported.

“Poverty, lack of democracy, corruption, abuse of power.” The people of Egypt, Mohyeldin argues, could see that the situation was unsustainable. “But nobody in Egypt could have predicted what the triggering mechanism was going to be, or whether it was going to spill over from an individual to a group action.”

He gives no credit to the movements, national associations, labor unions or the Muslim Brotherhood – the most organized political group in Egypt – who have tried to mobilize people (“unsuccessfully”, he says) over the past couple of years.

“They achieve what they achieved. They tried over the years, and it is difficult to say why this particular time became this particular tipping point. We had the revolution in Tunisia, and that was so important because it was the first time that the fear factor had been broken in any Arab country. Once the fear factor was broken, once the people in Tunisia saw that they could overcome their fear and challenge their government, this spread to Egypt. Egyptians said, “If the Tunisians can do it, why can’t we?”. It was about self-confidence, and inspiration.”

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Mohyeldin says that Al-Jazeera, Facebook, Twitter and other outlets successfully conveyed the fear factor -- an individual act of one man burning himself. It started spreading to villages, cities, the government, the capital and to the country. “And it spread to Egypt.”

“People are watching Al-Jazeera and they think, these are the people, they are just like me, they are just like you and they have the same problems and they overcame the government. The government is doing the same thing, they saw it fall in Tunisia and Egypt, and they realize: we can do it!” he argues.

During the early days of the Egyptian uprising, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called on former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to heed the demands of the Egyptian people and to relinquish power to a transitional governing body.

“Erdoğan’s speech was incredibly welcome in Egypt,” Mohyeldin says, noting that if the Prime Minister of Turkey gives advice, he is not dismissed as someone trying to interfere in the domestic affairs of Egypt - unlike the U.S president, or EU leaders.

Mohyeldin says that the Egyptian Foreign Ministry issued statements to other countries when they asked Mubarak to step down or when they criticized Egypt, saying that no country should interfere in Egyptian domestic affairs and that “we reject any Western influence in our country.”

He reports that Turkey had a great deal of credibility and popularity at this point.

“That’s why Erdoğan’s speech resonated so much louder than it normally would have. Turkey is a country that has close historical and cultural ties with Egypt. Many people are hopeful

that Egypt will follow a very similar path to the one Turkey has taken, and see Turkey as a model for development for change.

“When we speak about a Turkish model, we don’t mean ‘copy-paste’. Every country is different. Egypt can never be like Turkey. Egypt won’t be like Turkey. What is relevant about the Turkish model is the dynamic between the state and the people. Turkey is unique. Right now look at the Arab world. Look at the country and look at their property. When we speak about the transformation of state, we are speaking about the relationship between people and the institution. Turkey is a model because the country is predominantly Muslim. It is a country that has to deal with minority issues. It is a country that has to deal with issues of conservatism, existing on the border of two cultures and two civilizations – Europe and the Middle East. When I say model I don’t say that whatever Turkey is doing Egypt will be doing. I mean there is a lot to learn. Turkey is a country that enjoys a great deal of respect, popularity and credibility in the Arab world.

Mohyeldin describes how Al-Jazeera functions when there are a growing number of conspiracy theories which claim that the pan-Arab network is serving a hidden agenda.

“The policy of Al-Jazeera is to report on events, and report on the struggle of individuals. If the people in Kuwait go out, demonstrate and have a

revolution, Al-Jazeera will do its job and report. If the people in the United Arab Emirates don't go out on the streets, and if they are happy, Al-Jazeera will not do anything there, because there is nothing to report on. Al-Jazeera is an event-driven news organization. We are committed to cover events as they are. We don't say 'let's go to Saudi Arabia because Saudi Arabia is a monarchy.' There are people in Saudi Arabia who reject what is happening in Saudi Arabia.

"[Any possible events in Qatar] will be covered to the same degree; it would be no different from any other country and Al-Jazeera has proven this consistent treatment in the past. It is ironic when people talk about Al-Jazeera doing a contradictory job. They always say Al-Jazeera ignores what is going on in Qatar.

"Qatar is a very small country. How can it hold a significant presence in the international media? I find it interesting, because if we did a lot of reporting on Qatar, people would say "Al-Jazeera is reporting about Qatar, because this is where the network is based".

"If you ignore Qatar, if you don't report on it properly, then they would say that you are ignoring Qatar, you are not reporting on Qatar. What I always tell people is this: find me a story that has appeared in any international media about Qatar that has not appeared on Al-Jazeera or that Al-Jazeera has ignored. That is the

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best way to gauge the balance of reporting about Qatar. We have done issues that were difficult and important in the region- labor issues, human rights abuses against Indians, Pakistanis and other workers coming into the country, their working conditions and economic reforms. We deal with these issues in Qatar. I want somebody to come to me with a story that we haven't covered.

"I don't understand how Qatar should benefit from Al-Jazeera's role in reporting on Tunisia. The Qatari government does not have any political will towards Tunisia, even though a Qatari-based television channel played a major reformist role before and during the revolution. Qatar has begun to style itself as the broadcast hub of the region. There are so many questions about that logic, because many people would say that all countries prefer stability, thus why would they want instability, and why would they want people questioning whether the country really wants democracy. As we have seen, democracy and freedom are contagious. We have seen it in Eastern Europe and we have seen it in America. Thus if it spread to Tunisia and if it has spread to Egypt and Bahrain, it is going to spread everywhere in the Arab world.

“When a country has a government that is very much pro-stability and anti-democratic, it is unclear why Saddam would want to promote an agenda of pro-democracy, and create instability in the region. The logic does not add up. The relationship between Qatar and Al-Jazeera does not require all these conspiracy theories.

“First of all, I will talk about my personal experience. I have worked for Al-Jazeera for five years and I have never been told to do a story for any reason other than for its own editorial merits. No one told me ‘listen, I want you to do this story.’ That has never happened to me nor to any of my colleagues. That is no different from the model that exists in other countries.

“Al-Jazeera is no different. The State of Qatar pays for Al-Jazeera. It does not own Al-Jazeera’s editorial vision, it does not own Al-Jazeera’s profit; it simply finances the operation. It is an independent organization.”

Mohyeldin is also famous for his courageous coverage of the Gaza war in 2008-2009. “The experience in Gaza was incredible and intense. I have never lived in a war for 22 days,” says Mohyeldin, adding that not only was that an intense war, but also 22 days of war after nearly two years of being under siege.

Mohyeldin explains his experience in Gaza: “Gaza was destroyed. It was depressed and destitute. The war has made it more difficult for the people there. It was very frightening and in

the midst of all that, we found people’s resilience and determination to survive, their steadfastness. What I take from that experience is that even in the direst of situations, human beings can still endure. As a human being, you grow from that, live that and realize sacrifice, struggle, and discipline,” he reflects.

Mohyeldin is critical about mainstream American media and claims that it has failed in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “objectively and fairly.”

“They tend to look at the conflict from specific narrative, through a very specific prism. With that prism, they see all these other stories. It is not objective; it is not fair. That is the fundamental problem. I think there are other elements too, and there are occasionally very good reports that break this pattern.

Mohyeldin believes that any leadership or government that is not built on the foundations of justice, democracy, pluralism and tolerance is bound to fail, no matter how much backing it has from the West, no matter how much the state tries to appease European powers, and no matter how much economic importance the state holds for the world.

“If you don’t build your own system of government whereby you govern fairly, equally and justly, it is going to come back, fail and explode. I think that is what we are seeing in Libya,” he stresses.

Mohyeldin thinks that the US is now playing “catch-up.”

“I think the US never imagined that its foreign policy in this region would fail so tremendously. Right now, the US is now establishing its intelligence community and it will have to reinvent its policy from scratch.

It is going to have new players to deal with- ones who are no longer going to be subservient. The tools at

portant. We see other Arab countries applying the same type of vision as Turkey.”

Colloquy conducted by Mahir Zeynalov, Managing Editor of CI.

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the disposal of these countries have changed. What you are going to see is that the US foreign policy will be more engaging, and not so dictatorial, in contrast to the past, when the U.S foreign policy toward the Middle East was very didactic.

The U.S dictated to the Arab leaders what it wanted from them, but now it is going to be different. Now there are governments that have established genuine democratic systems that can reflect the will of the people, and that can say to the U.S what is and what is not in their interests.

Turkey has exercised that sovereignty in one occasion and it is very im-