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Transcript

Al Jazeera and the Arab Spring

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Jane Kinninmont:

I'd like to welcome Wadah Khanfar. Wadah stepped down last year as the director general of Al Jazeera after eight years at the network. And Al Jazeera of course as you all know has been a rather influential force in the world for several years, I would say probably it's the first major challenge to the domination of the international media by Western broadcasters. I think it's no exaggeration to say that. But over the last twelve months in particular it's been a force with rising influence owing to its ground-breaking coverage of the Arab awakenings in particular.

Wadah Khanfar is well-placed to tell us a great deal about the network, about the changes happening in the Middle East, and perhaps he will also have time to tell us a little about his new initiative, because today he is chairing a new initiative called the Sharq Network, which is a network seeking to develop political stability and economic prosperity across the Middle East – no small task.

Please note that this event is not being held under the Chatham House rule. It is an on the record event, and it's also actually being live-streamed online to Chatham House members. So bear that in mind when you're asking any questions, that it is all on the record. Without further ado, I'll hand over to Mr Khanfar. Thank you very much, it's an honour to have you with us.

Wadah Khanfar:

Thank you very much. Thank you all, thank you for coming and I hope we are going to exchange some good thoughts and ideas about the current situation in the Arab world.

But before I start, I would like to go back to the end of 2010, just a few days before the revolution, or the 'Arab Spring', or the Arab 'Awakening', or the Arab 'thing' started. And actually, at that time I was leading Al Jazeera, and we used to have a daily planning meeting in the news room, where we bring all channels together in order to contemplate and analyse daily events and try to put it in context. To be frank, we have never expected the magnitude of events that have started a few weeks after that particular meeting, which took place at the end of November, in order to speak about the year.

In my opinion, what happened in the Arab world took everyone by surprise. Not because we have no reason, or people have no reason to revolt or to change their reality. We had every possible reason to do so. Corrupt ageing regimes, we have, you know, dictatorships, authoritarian systems that have

been in place for decades. Worse than that, we had no horizon for any peaceful change because most of these regimes, in order to survive, after they made some kind of alliance between small circles of political elite with circles of business and financial elite, actually they eliminated everyone, including their political parties. Ruling parties – in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Yemen – the ruling party did not actually exist by the end of that particular period. And these people started monopolizing power.

What actually led them to that stage is 11 September. After 11 September, the Arab world went through a series of events whereby the state was unleashed – security, intelligence was given green light to crack down on everyone under the banner of fighting terrorism. So the little bit of democratic formalities were actually, you know, wiped out, and I'm afraid that the Western attitude, especially the American attitude, was the issue of fighting terrorism creating from these Arab regimes not only people who are working against democracy but they were celebrated as great people who were fighting terrorism. You should remember that our cells were torturing people, in the rendition story, for the Americans, in the prisons of the CIA. So what message we were sending to the Arab governments? 'What you are doing is magnificent, thank you very much, and your expertise are most needed and actually you should be, you know, celebrated for that'.

These governments lost control of their appetite to control everything and to proceed without any proper justification or imagination or deception. They couldn't even have the ability to deceive the public in a right way. Even their propaganda, the state propaganda, lost its ability to propagate a message that might be to a small extent even capable of convincing anyone. They lost, we have been in front of regimes that, you know, that are not actually able to have any kind of imagination.

The most important part of our life by the end of 2010 was that even our opposition lost imagination. The political groups and parties, movements, people who have been fighting for freedom and democracy for the last four or five decades, they also reached a point where they are exhausted, fragmented, a lot of them are in exile, a lot of them are in jail, and the rest have started to accommodate themselves with the low ceiling that governments are giving them. So they are happy with that, trying to enhance a little bit, a little bit of conditions whereby they can survive or enhance the captivity and the oppressive environment they are living in. No one was talking about radical change.

Take Egypt, for example. When we sat down to analyze Egypt at that time, by that time we are talking about Gamal Mubarak becoming a president. The discussion is when is his father going to hand over to him, is it before his term in power ends or the next elections in September 2011. That was the question, the question was when Gamal Mubarak will take over. When Ahmed, the son of Ali Abdullah Saleh, would take over. When Saif al-Islam, the son of Gaddafi, will take over. When the wife of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, or one of his [inaudible], will take over. That was the imagination – the issue is when, and how, and what kind of scenario. No respect for constitutions, the constitution can be changed in five minutes in any parliament in the Arab world. No respect for any tradition. And even the tradition of a little bit of political and democratic system that existed in the 1950s, and sometimes in the 1940s, we lost that completely. As if we are living even in an age which has never had a relationship with political activism in the Arab world.

So that was a major problem. We are locked in a circle, the government or authorities defined the borders, we are trying... We lost, a lot of people lost interest in the fact that there could be change. You know, everyone was waiting for a divine intervention, for the Angel of Death to come down and take some people and change the reality. Some people also are waiting for the Mahdi who is supposed to come and also... I mean, but, oh and by the way I'm not joking! Divine intervention was something that everyone was talking about. By the way, the day of judgment is close. You know when societies feel that they are so depressed and that they cannot find any solution they resort as well to all kinds of ways.

Now, on the other end of that, outside the centre of activism in the Arab world – or the traditional way of thinking about politics – we have the youth. Now these youth, for the last five-six years, have been developing their own networks. These networks have a different philosophy and values than our political elite, both the state and the opposition. The youth have developed networks and the network in my opinion by nature is democratic. The network allows you to be a member without your legacy. So I don't need to know who are you, first, your name might not be even mentioned. I don't really know which tribe you belong to, which religion or sect or ethnicity. All of us are equal. The most important amongst us is the one who gives more to the network. He becomes more celebrated and accepted and, you know, more, in a more leading position.

So this network concept, you know, started developing a paradigm far from the paradigm that governments and the opposition have come to acknowledge as reality. So there's a new reality emerging, it was virtual, but

this virtual reality created a new imagination about what change we would like to see. These youth, they are talking to each other across borders, and they are talking to international youth as well, and learning from them, and listening to them and exchanging thoughts with them. So their imagination is completely different from the imagination of our political elite in the Arab world.

And second, the defining moment was when they decided to start centralizing their activism – and still we are virtual – around values rather than ideology. So instead of us defining, we define, most all of our political parties in the Arab world define themselves based on ideological alliance, you have pro-Arab nationalists, Islamists, and socialists, and secularists. These guys started developing themes around good governance, democracy, human rights, fighting corruption, and started also imagining the future and thinking about or dreaming about the future, something that we are not used to do by that time. So they developed that kind of world.

Governments were sceptical, but ignorance is sometimes a very beautiful thing because these guys could not deal properly. They thought by putting two, three guys in jail they could sort out the problem. Tunisia started, the first country by the way to put bloggers in jail was Tunisia. But every time they put a blogger in jail he comes out as a hero. So they wait a few weeks, but then when he goes out he's a magnificent person, everyone celebrates him, and again he will continue the struggle. They tried to block most of the websites that are very active, like you know YouTube was closed in Tunisia for years. Facebook sometimes was closed. Most of blogging sites were closed down by the authorities, and the Al Jazeera website was closed by authorities, by the way, for a long time.

What happened is, these guys are fantastic. Because they are well-connected with everyone all over the world, they figure out ways of going around these proxies that the government is installing. And now – I'm writing a book about this issue now – when I go back to that era, to 2010, 2009, you go to some activists and you read their blogs, they are giving clear instructions to those that are following their blogs and their websites, how to go around the proxy, and how to develop some kind of system that the government cannot break. And they succeeded. So whatever the government does, these guys come with most creative solution. And again the creativity is something that, it works, it always does, while structural, hierarchical parties, traditional ones, will take a long time before they approve a new methodology or a new decision or a new system or a new programme. Networks they can approve it over, online immediately without the need for long deliberations and a lot of

discussion and a lot of approvals. So that also was very dynamic and a very flexible environment that these guys have done.

The state made a huge mistake. The state could not understand to what extent these kids could be dangerous. And if you remember Hosni Mubarak a few days, not Hosni Mubarak, one of his leading ministers, a few days before the revolution started 25 January, when he was asked, he said you know what, these kids, they go to Tahrir Square we'll send them some sweets to eat and we'll send them home. Actually Gaddafi, he did something interesting, he called upon the chiefs of the tribes to his tent. He told them, 'listen, there are some kids doing stupid things on the Internet and they are calling for demonstrations'. Now, I am holding you accountable. You go, collect your kids and bring them home, otherwise I'm going to leave you accountable for that, the chiefs of the tribes'. Of course the kids do not listen to the chiefs of the tribes. They have their own philosophy and culture and they don't really care what everyone else is.

So, governments were still thinking with the old way of thinking. The youth are developing, you know, genius ways and alternatives that governments could not understand or deal with. Until – this is why, by the way – until now a lot of political elites, especially those who are still supporting old regimes, they still believe that what's happening in the Arab world is a conspiracy. You cannot tell me that the youth could change things. This is, the Americans, with Israelis, with any other forces coming from all over the world –

Jane Kinninmont:

With Al Jazeera?

Wadah Khanfar:

Yes so. Conspiring in order to bring down regimes. In order to create a vacuum in the Arab world, and in order to create fragmentation of the society. This theory, by the way, I am not saying that it is marginal. A lot of people within the old frame of thinking, from people who support old regimes, like the Syrian regime at this point in time, a lot of people in the Gulf, a lot of people in many other circles, they support this argument. That it is a conspiracy. You don't believe, there's nothing called the Arab Spring. This is a conspiracy created by the West, and then they bring some stories, you know, like some bloggers have been, they visited America and they spent one week listening to lectures about how to organize social networks, and they connected

themselves with a think tank in the process, and all these type of stories come up, and it becomes a huge narrative about the conspiracy that the world is leading to bring down the Arab regimes.

Anyway, that is not the point. Now, revolution has started because of these youth. The agenda of the revolution was not defined by political parties or groups, it was defined by the public, by the masses in the street. Rather than – although the spark of it, which happened for example in Tunisia, started as protest against unemployment. But within three days' time it was politicized. Lawyers came down to the street with their robes, and they said 'Yes, unemployment is very bad, but we should not forget that human rights, and abuse of human rights, and corruption is leading our societies to this kind of decay. So let us, all of us, fight against corruption and against authoritarian regimes'.

The revolution started to be politicized. And this idea was rejected in it and things changed. The same in Egypt. Maybe people when they started marching they started against torture, as you know. It was the 25 January, the day of police. So they protested against torture in cells, the police cells. But later on it was also, it took that kind of theme until they brought down the regime. Youth have played a major role.

We in the media, in the traditional media, were taken by surprise at the beginning. Our coverage of Tunisia in the first two or three days was very soft. We did not expect those things – you know, always people protest, but to what these protests could become a revolution, that was not actually part of our expectation. In Egypt also it started, we started reluctant and then after that we've thought that this uprising is becoming a real revolution and then of course we joined the coverage intensively.

Social media played a huge role at the beginning. Because in both countries, Tunisia and Egypt, and later on of course in Libya, we did not have correspondents who are covering freely even. In Tunisia we had no presence whatsoever, because we were banned from working in Tunisia as Al Jazeera. In Egypt, Al Jazeera immediately after the revolution started was banned, the office was closed and correspondents were not allowed to move at all. And even the satellite signal of Al Jazeera covering Egypt was dropped from NileSat, which is the major Arab satellite distribution.

However, these guys saved us. The images that started coming through YouTube, and started coming through Facebook, and their blogs, provided us with not only enough material but a new kind of material, material that looks more authentic, although we were reluctant to cover or to carry this material.

It is not high definition, it is not stable, the quality is bad. But people, when they start seeing these mobile video images, shaking ones, they thought this is more authentic than what professionals are doing. So the public were not actually, I mean, I felt that the public like it more than they like the classic, traditional, beautiful shots of our cameramen and women.

And the second issue also that these guys can provide you immediately the stream to the news room, maybe tens and sometimes hundreds of videos of an event that is still happening. So you can cover this event at the same moment and at various angles because it's easy to do that. So definitely that saved us from the lack of video and the lack of presence or correspondents in various cities.

But we saved them a few days later. When internet was stopped in Egypt for example and the government brought down internet all over the country, the guys could not send anything. Already at that moment Al Jazeera and other broadcasters as well has established themselves in the scene, and has already collected enough material and contacts and proper understanding of what's happening, and they picked up the coverage, and the coverage started again. I think the coverage started from the bloggers and the internet activists, but it was amplified and sent to everyone's home through traditional screens and mainstream media.

So a new ecosystem emerged within media during the Arab Spring, an ecosystem that did not exist before. Because all of us, those who are working in traditional media in fact are sceptical about new media. And we think these guys, in a way, you know we think we are smarter and have been educated in a way in universities about media, and also we are professionals, we spent 30-40 years doing this, everything. And again, these kids cannot come and overtake this magnificent achievement of ours. But later on we discovered that they are not competing with us, they are complementing what we do. They are helping us. And we are not competing with them, we are complementing what they do. So, a new ecosystem emerged where new media and traditional media work together hand in hand and introduce to the audience magnificent coverage of events as they happen. This is about the media.

To conclude: The Arab world at this time is going through a huge transformation. This transformation is not going to spare anyone. Every country in the region, not only the Arab world but the region itself, the extended Middle East, is going to face a new reality. Either strategic in nature, like what could happen if the Syrian revolution succeeds in bringing down the

regime. It means there is a bloc that extends from Tehran through Baghdad, through Damascus, into Lebanon that is going to have new reality to deal with that. Of course, you have Istanbul, and Turkey, and you have the rest of the Arab world that is still waiting to see what landscape we are going to look at. Strategically, everyone is going to face new reality and they have to develop new mechanisms and a new framework of dealing with it.

However, in domestic affairs as well, everyone is going to face the following question: Are you going to change, or are you going to be changed? So in Morocco, they started, they made constitution reforms, they met the people half-way. They introduced new elections, and they accepted to form a government in coalition between Islamists and other political groups, which is working so far. In Jordan, still, things are happening, no constitutional change has yet happened but in my opinion the only solution for the Jordanian situation is to have also constitutional reforms and to lead with some kind of openness with the public and free elections that could again unify the people and, you know, stop any kind of deterioration of the situation.

Then you have the Gulf. The Gulf is, by and large, going to change the last, in my opinion. Because of many reasons. One of them is Iran. The presence of Iran as a power in the region is always something that might affect the way that people think about the regimes. Because they don't want to see an external threat overtaking, if you have weakened your regimes. That's number one. And second, the Gulf, again they need to think about reforms and they need to have some kind of serious reforms in their structures. Because you can't think of the future without really rethinking the current, you know, structures and systems that they are operating on. Impossible. That's it, finished. The time now has exceeded the era where you have one particular group or one particular person leading and defining the game in any country.

So there is something happening, it depends who is clever enough to understand it and deal with it. Those who resist or who cast doubt on it or, even worse, work against it, I think on the long run they're going to face consequences, serious ones, from the public. The public is well-connected nowadays. Our public is smart, and our public is politicized. They are not simple, naïve, people that you can convince them with a few statements or any discourse, neither religious nor patriotic, and you cannot also still convince them that we are the enemies of Israel so we have to be united. That kind of discourse, at this moment in time, is not working. People understand that they have to change their reality and to achieve democracy

before they start talking about other issues that they have to sort out and they have to deal with.

So reality is changing, and the arrival of new forces into the society like the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic movements is not something scary, it's something that should be accepted because these are organic movements, they have grown from within the system for the last 70-80 years, and so far their discourse and their rhetoric is in line with democracy and human rights and international understanding of that. My argument is, the most important factor in the evolution of Islamic movements at this moment in time is pragmatic understanding of reality and events rather than ideology.

So we are in front of movements who are flexible and dynamic, and they are developing their discourse. The role model of these Islamic movements is going to be the Turkish model rather than Taliban or Iran. Because you have these three models at this moment in time. Although the Turkish model, the AK Party, define themselves as a secular party, but with Islamic background – in my opinion, Islamic movements will go into that route. More liberal views that will open up for diversity within the movements and within their surroundings. But they will not revert to the Iranian model or to the Taliban model of more strict and radical understanding of politics and international politics. Thank you very much.