

Interview with Al Jazeera Channel

(January 2004 in Qatar)

On 5 January 2004, I visited Al Jazeera in Qatar and had an interview with Mr. Jihad Ali Ballout, Section Head, Communications & Media Relations, Marketing Development, at this office. The interview was concerned with Osama bin Ladin video tapes, Iraqi situation, Japan's reconstruction efforts in Iraq. He kindly accepted my interview, as the timing was good (Japan's Self Defense Force has just been dispatched to Iraq) and it was the first time for him to be interviewed by a Japanese woman. The interview was



conducted in English for 40 minutes. The script is an extract of the whole interview. English is kept as originally as possible (i.e. 'Japan's Self Defense Force' is sometimes referred to as 'troops' or even 'military' as it appears to be interpreted as 'military' in the Arab world)

(Q) Al Jazeera seems to have earned credibility from Osama bin Ladin because he provides you with video tapes which you run through your TV program. How did you get credibility from him and how do you get video tapes from him?

(A) I cannot tell you how we get video tapes. We do not have direct contact or a link with Osama bin Ladin. Osama bin Ladin, like anyone else, has a message to send out. With Al Jazeera's credibility, he believes we provide good communication to the audience, such as to Muslims and Arabs. In the past, when British Prime Minister Tony Blair wanted to discuss and explain his policy on the Middle East, he chose Al Jazeera to give his statement and to send a message to the Arab world. The Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi did the same. He chose Al Jazeera to communicate with the Arab world to explain his policy of sending Japanese troops to Iraq. World leaders and well-known people realize the strength of Al Jazeera because it passes so many messages to the Arab world. Again there is no link with Osama bin Ladin. We never know when he sends us video tapes. If you recall, other tapes were also sent to Al Jazeera, including Saddam Hussein, and sometimes from Iraqi resistance forces.

(Q) A few days ago, an interview with Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi was broadcast through Al Jazeera. I watched the interview at my hotel. What is the impact of his interview to the Arab world?

(A) It is very difficult to say. There has been a question mark in Arab states as to why Japan has decided to send troops to a country in a hostile environment for the first time in 44 years. Japan had been hesitant to dispatch its troops overseas for 45 years. Some people say because Japan was pressured by the US, some people say because it is for a greater contribution to international peace, and other people say Japan has an interest in Iraq (i.e. oil) for the benefit of Japan. But I can tell you this, if the Japanese Prime Minister has sent a clear message that the purpose of sending Japanese troops is to help stabilize and reconstruct Iraq, not a gesture to support US military, his TV appearance in our program would be said to be successful.

(Q) What do you think how the Arab people assess Japan's decision to send its troops to Iraq?

(A) I think they are waiting to see how the Japanese troops behave on the ground. They are also waiting to see how the Japanese government reacts to attacks against the Japanese troops. I think there is a worry in Tokyo that the Japanese troops may be attacked or subjected to an attack. If this happens, Arab people will see how the Japanese government reacts. Is it going to be a gun fight between the Japanese force and Iraqi insurgencies involving civilian death, will the US force be involved in the fight, or will the Japanese troops withdraw from Iraq?

It is important to remember that by international law the American and British forces are occupation forces. The Japanese troops are also part of the occupation forces. Arab people will evaluate Japan's contribution relatively at an early stage. If the Japanese troops recover infrastructure (electricity, water) and rebuild hospitals and schools, Arab people will highly evaluate their contribution in Iraq. If security situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate, reconstruction process is slow and the Japanese military closely works with the US military, the evaluation will be very different from what Japan is hoping for. For now, Arab people are giving an opportunity to Japan to demonstrate its efforts to reconstruct Iraq. Because Arab states and Japan have a good relationship, the Arab people are prepared to give Japan a benefit of the doubt to see how Japan can contribute to Iraq.

(Q) There is an opinion by Iraqi people that Japan should dispatch civilians instead of troops because Iraqis do not generally welcome an occupation force. They welcome civilians such as

engineers and doctors because Iraqis know that they come to Iraq for reconstruction purposes, not occupation purposes, and thus will never attack such people. What do you think about this?

(A) I am not so sure that Japanese civilians will be safe 100%. There are resistances in Iraq who do not want Iraq to be stabilized. The Iraqi situation is very complex. Even 5% of the Iraqi people who are determined to destabilize the situation may attack Japanese civilians. They know how to attack and will execute when needed. If it becomes very clear that Japanese troops are really contributing to the reconstruction of Iraq rather than fighting alongside with the US force, the Japanese troops will be respected and more welcomed. But I am not 100% for sure Japanese civilians will never be targeted because Iraqi situations is very complex and volatile.

Lastly, I believe that Japan made a brave decision. I hope Japan will manage to stay away from political affairs, security matters and the US military as much as possible and will help reconstruct even one city of Iraq with Japan's high technology to show a good example of Japan's international contribution. Japan has its own mission to play.

My comment

It has been more than six months since Japan's Self Defense Force was dispatched to Iraq. Japan's operation in Samawa is being more recognized, however, water and electricity have not fully been recovered and people are still struggling every day because of lack of daily necessities. It will be increasingly important for Japan to know that what sort of contribution Japan is expected from Iraq and what Japan should do to meet such



expectations. Iraq wants Japan to improve their lives, recover infrastructure and rebuild more schools and hospitals using Japan's high technology to the maximum extent. As the state of advanced technology, Japan should respond to world's needs by providing maximum level of high technology. This is what the world is hoping for and Japan's international contribution should be.