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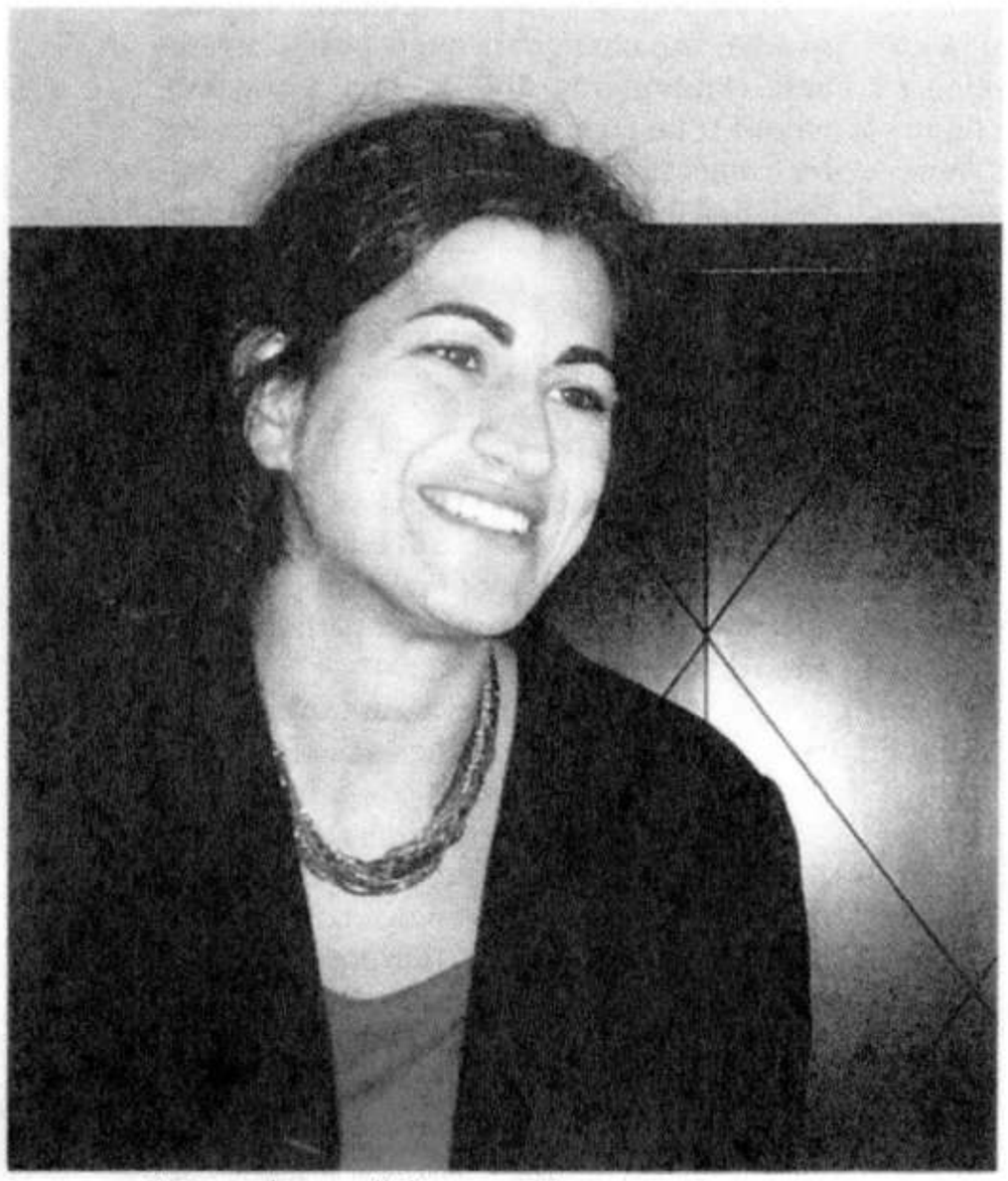
"Control Room" Views War on Iraq Through Al-Jazeera's Lenses

By Pat McDonnell Twair

Special*Report*



"Control Room" director Jehane Nojaim.

Al-Jazeera's Hassan Ibrahim (l) with "Control Room" cinematographer Hani Salama.

STAFF PHOTOS S. TWAIR

Ever since the Bush administration described it as the mouthpiece of Osama bin Laden, the Arab satellite TV network al-Jazeera has been a mystery to most Americans.

Until June, that is, when as many as 110 cinemas across the country were screening Jehane Noujaim's "Control Room," which documents al-Jazeera's coverage of the six weeks before, during and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Her focus on the controversial Arab station was accidental, said Noujaim, who earned critical acclaim for her 2001 documentary, "Startup.com." As the whole world watched the downhill slide into the 2003 Gulf war, the Harvard-educated filmmaker became obsessed with being in the midst of the action, reporting how the Arab and Western media covered the invasion.

Because her mother is an American from Indiana and her father is Egyptian, Noujaim explained, she is equally at home in the U.S. or Egypt. In the States, accusations were rife that al-Jazeera was churning out anti-American propaganda to its 40 million Arab viewers. In Cairo, however, her father couldn't get enough of the news channel. It was the same for most Egyptians.

Noujaim, who just turned 30, said she became aware of the al-Jazeera phenomenon as early as 1997, when she took a break from her job as a producer for MTV's News and Documentary division to visit her parents in Cairo. She was amazed to see as many as 30 or 40 people crowded around a TV set watching debates on al-Jazeera about religion, the rights of divorced women, or birth control.

"This was revolutionary—both sides of topics heretofore *haram* [prohibited] to public discussion in Arab countries were being broadcast on al-Jazeera," she recalled.

The innovative station was showing what no Western news team ever had. It was in Palestine filming 10-year-old Mohammed al-Doura crouch behind his father as Israeli bullets riddled their bodies; it was in Iraqi hospitals showing children languishing for lack of medicine banned by U.S. sanctions; it was in Afghanistan filming civilian casualties of U.S. bombing missions.

In response, the U.S. charged that al-Jazeera was poisoning the minds of its viewers with these images.

"It seemed so hypocritical," Noujaim said. "The U.S. prides itself on its free press. Yet it was furious that al-Jazeera staffers were risking their lives to bring the turmoil in Middle Eastern trouble spots to Arab viewers—facts the U.S. does not allow Americans to see."

Noujaim tried to gain permission from al-Jazeera to film its operations from its headquarters in the tiny oil emirate of Qatar.

"The top journalists in the world already were in Qatar," she said, "which also was the base for the U.S. military's Central Command (Centcom). It was getting all the publicity it needed—an independent filmmaker like myself would just have been an inconvenience."

So she bought an air ticket to Doha, rented a room in an inexpensive Pakistani hotel and met with Mohammed Jasen, the former head of al-Jazeera. The interview was arranged by Abdullah Schleifer, an American University of Cairo (AUC) journalism instructor who was in Doha at the time.

Noujaim made no headway with Jasen, however, as she explained she would be working with lightweight cameras that require no special lighting and would not interfere with al-Jazeera newsroom broadcasts.

Her lucky break occurred in the al-Jazeera cafeteria, where she met Samir Khader, a senior producer at the station, and Sudan-born broadcaster Hassan Ibrahim. They liked her, and evidently sensed she was trying to capture al-Jazeera's message: Arabs wake up!

When the two gave her permission to film inside al-Jazeera, Noujaim called cinematog-

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rapher Hani Salama in Cairo to join her in Doha.

The two handled all sound and camera equipment. Noujaim shouldered a VX2000 camera, while Salama worked with a Sony P-D 150.

"These new cameras helped break the ice," noted Salama during an interview in Los Angeles. "There were no diversions, we didn't need 10 minutes to set up lights, we became shadows that didn't distract reporters from going about their business."

"On the other hand," Noujaim interjected, "my camera worked on the ATSC system, while Hani's camera was on PAL—this caused a lot of delays later during the editing process."

Like Noujaim, Salama is a hybrid: his mother is a Bosnian physician, his father an Egyptian doctor. Salama and Noujaim met in 2000, while he was producing a "Woodstock in the Desert" concert in Cairo. Even though he is completing a master's degree in broadcast journalism at AUC, Salama already has worked as a free-lance producer for NBC, CNBC, BBC and CBC.

The next hurdle for the freelancers was to get inside Centcom. Schleifer, who is Salama's professor, once more paved the way and introduced them to Lt. John Rushing, the Marine public information officer in charge of presenting the U.S. military viewpoint to the international media.

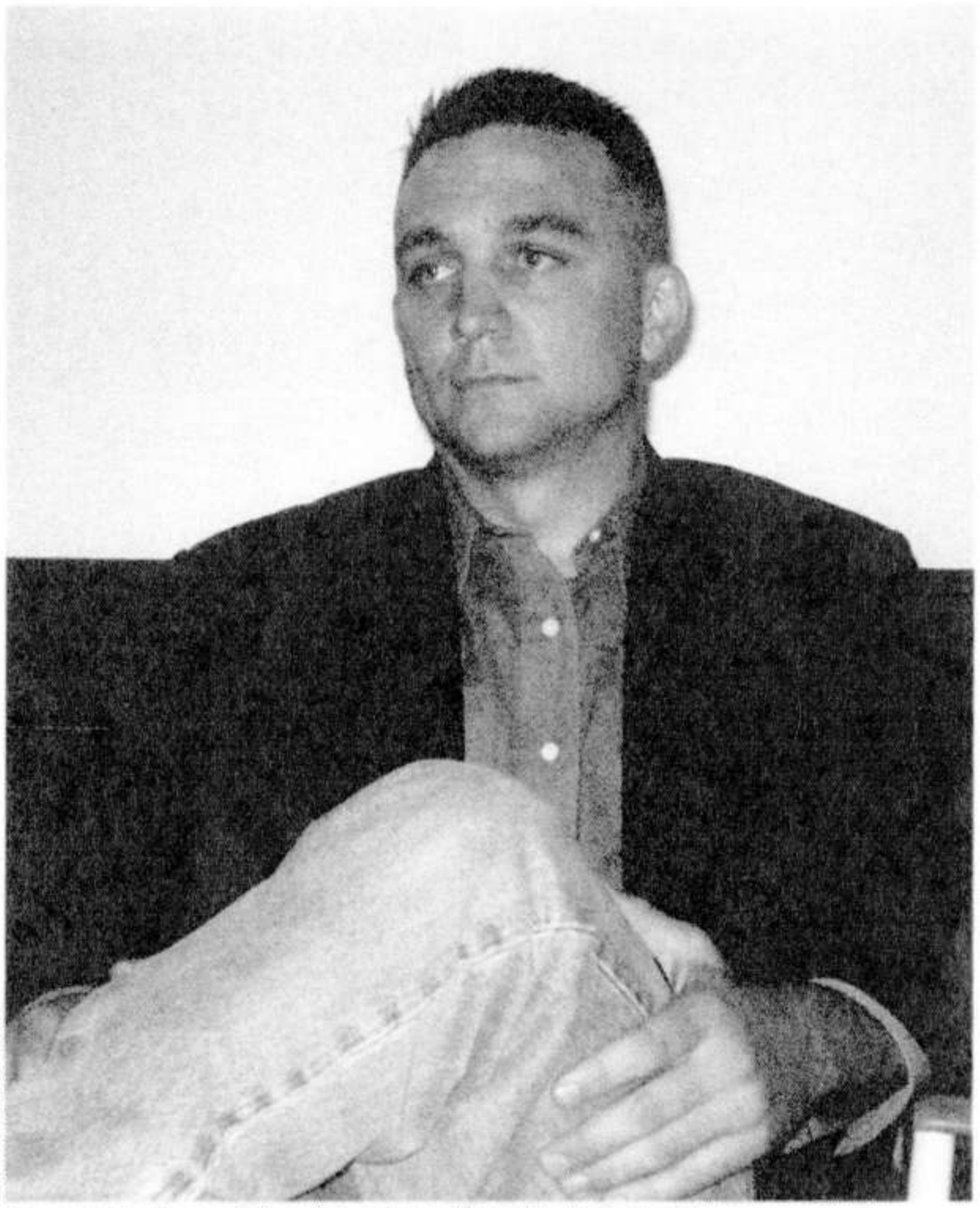
Another lucky break is that Rushing had seen and admired "Startup.com," and he was willing to talk at length with the freelancers.

Rushing is a dream straight out of central casting: a squeaky clean, idealistic American. When he first appears in "Control Room" and earnestly tells the camera the U.S. is not in the Gulf to occupy or take oil, you know he believes it.

His transition from reciting the U.S. military line is revealed in his admission that he is bothered that images of Iraqi dead and wounded do not affect him the same way that observing fallen American troops does.

In one scene, Rushing tells Schleifer that al-Jazeera covers up Saddam's crimes. Schleifer responds that Iraqis perceive American treatment of Iraqis as exactly the same as what Israelis do to Palestinians. Recognition of the analogy registers on the Marine's face.

As the first bombs drop on Baghdad, reporters in the al-Jazeera control room flinch and look in disbelief at images of the capital being hit with what seems like every technological blockbuster in the U.S. arsenal.



STAFF PHOTO S. TWAIR

Former Marine public information officer Lt. Josh Rushing.

"Control Room" gives many Americans their first view of corpses and incinerated Iraqis—images which al-Jazeera broadcast to the rest of the world. At the sight of a stack of dead bodies in northern Iraq, al-Jazeera's Ibrahim quips: "You can bomb us, but don't ask us to love you as well."

As the maimed corpse of a toddler is flashed on screen, Khader comments wryly: "Rumsfield calls this incitement. I call it true journalism."

The audience groans when President George W. Bush, objecting to American prisoners being shown on al-Jazeera, proclaims: "We treat our captured humanely."

To this presidential statement, Ibrahim comments: "*Now,* there is a Geneva Convention? What about Gitmo [Guantanamo]?"

Asked if she regrets having completed "Control Room" before such revelations as the torture of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison, Noujaim replied, "Absolutely not. You set yourself up if you go back and update later events. You can't patchwork in developments. As it stands," she pointed out, "the Bush statement on treatment of Iraqi prisoners is all the more hypocritical."

Noujaim and Salama returned to Cairo with 200 hours of DV film. Four editors volunteered their time for six months. Payback for everyone involved in the film depends on how well the documentary is received.

"I still haven't compiled all the receipts for my bills," Noujaim confessed. "During all those months of editing, I wondered if we would even be able to show the film in Canadian art cinemas. The U.S. seemed an impossibility."

Nonetheless, "Control Room" was entered in the Sundance Film Festival in January. The enthusiastic response was dazzling. Within hours Magnolia Pictures told Noujaim it wanted to be the U.S. distributor.

In Utah for the festival, Ibrahim found himself an overnight celebrity. "People came up to me in restaurants and offered to pay for my dinner. I told them to go ahead," he chuckled.

A former director of the BBC Arab News service, Ibrahim attended the University of Arizona at Tucson and earlier attended the same boy's school in Saudi Arabia as Osama bin Laden.

What was the al-Qaeda leader like?

"He was the quietest, most polite student," Ibrahim recalled, "and made a point of getting out of the family limousine so he could walk to school with us."

Ibrahim's first wife, free-lance journalist Lena Khoury, was killed in Lebanon one day before the massacre at Sabra and Shatila.

After Sundance, word spread about "Control Room" like a California brush fire. The week after its May 21 opening at the Film Forum in New York, it was moved to two larger venues.

Present at a June 14 private screening in Beverly Hills was Lt. Rushing, since promoted to the rank of captain. After 14 years in the Marine Corps, however, he is resigning. But until he is released, he cannot voice his opinion—nor did he that evening. Nonetheless, one can surmise his viewpoint from a closing comment he makes in "Control Room": "If I get out of the Marine Corps and I do anything, I want to do something with the Palestinian issue. I don't think Americans are getting good information about it. I really don't."

If moviegoers continue to flock to "Control Room" this summer, al-Jazeera broadcasters may become as familiar to Americans as CNN's Wolf Blitzer or Fox News' Bill O'Reilly.

Next year, al-Jazeera will begin English-language broadcasts in the U.S. ❑