

**The Times | The mouse that roared****BY Jon Snow | JANUARY 8, 2005**

One of the high spots of Tony Blair's monthly Downing Street press conferences is the moment when the al-Jazeera correspondent puts his hand up. Those present detect an audible intake of breath from the Prime Minister as he calls for the question.

Blair is not alone in his reservations about the 24-hour Arab news station.

Indeed, there are many world leaders who feel strongly enough to want the station off the air altogether. Among them are the political and military leadership of the US presence in Iraq. Over the months they have both bombed and banned the station's office in Baghdad. The Saudis have banned al-Jazeera from its kingdom, and are waging a vindictive economic war against the station, designed to starve it off the air.

But al-Jazeera will not be starved. That is because, as Hugh Miles chronicles in *Al Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*, the station has remarkably rich roots. It is based in Qatar, the very Gulf state from which the US has chosen to fight the war on Iraq, and in which it has relocated its former Saudi-based operations in the Middle East.

Qatar is ruled by the Sandhurst-educated Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, who staged a coup against his father a decade ago. As Miles reports, he rules the tiny gas-rich state "like a managing director running a large corporation". He sees the country's future in terms of an "Arab version of Switzerland: rich, neutral, and secure". Unlike Switzerland, however, political parties are banned. The extensive CID, or secret police force, has kept the state terror free despite the vast US military presence.

Facing out to Iran, with Saudi at its back, Kuwait and Iraq further up the Gulf, Qatar had long held a trading balance between conflicting Sunni and Shia states in the region. Perhaps because of its strategic location and its own vast wealth (the world's third-largest gas reserves are beneath its sands), Qatar has managed to sustain an idiosyncratic independence.

Miles's book details how the concept of an Arab satellite station proved to be a natural fit with Qatar's historic position. He also shows how the Emir conjured an "independent" editorial status for the station and has deployed many hundreds of millions of dollars of his own money to keep it on the air.

Almost a decade after al-Jazeera hit the airwaves the all-news station has been joined by at least half a dozen Arab competitors, including the Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBC) and Abu Dhabi TV. The reality is that many influential regimes and commercial operatives in the Arab world, having failed to put al-Jazeera out of business, are determined to mimic the station with their own.

Miles details the catalogue of attempts to shut al-Jazeera down. The Emir has resisted them all, from the withdrawal of ambassadors to the hounding and locking up of the station's staff across the region. Many in the Bush Administration would also like to see its end. Yet the fact that Washington depends so strategically on Qatar may in part explain its complete failure to

influence the course of the station's development and its continuing popularity on the Arab street.

For generations, the Americans and their Western allies enjoyed the consequences of the rigid dictatorial hold that most Arab regimes held over their people.

Nobody questioned the corruption that accompanied Britain's vast Al Yamama defence deal. Few questioned the true nature of the Mubarak regime in Egypt.

Not everyone on the Muslim street in the Middle East thanks Allah for al Jazeera, however. Many Shias hate the station. Many Iranians regard it as a mouthpiece for the Sunni world; in Iraq, American pressure against the station has been quietly popular with the Shia majority.

Inevitably, when discussing al-Jazeera in the West we are bound to view it through the prism of our own interests. The mere mention of the station in some Western quarters is a watchword for Arab hatred of our values. Yet the closer examination that Miles's book affords reveals a station that has transmitted live interviews with Israeli ministers, debates with members of the Bush Administration, and several interviews with Tony Blair. While the varied taped appearances of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein before the Iraq war scandalised the West, the appearance of these US, Israeli and European interviewees has startled Arab viewers.

Turn on the average Arab terrestrial television news, and you find an account of world affairs dominated by the doings of the ruling king, sheikh or president. The print media is the same. Even this month's edition of Horus, Egypt Air's in flight magazine, sports President Mubarak on its cover and offers six pictures of him inside. This is the cosy repressive Arab media world that al-Jazeera and its rivals have challenged.

Yet it is a development that the West views with suspicion and fear. One of the signals that inspired the station's founders was the power and exclusivity wielded by CNN in 1991 in Baghdad when Peter Arnett's reports of the opening salvos of the Gulf War took the world by storm. But CNN's description of events, minute by minute, was a very Western account. Where was the Arab perspective?

Almost a decade and a half on, nobody asks the question. To the daily fury of the Coalition of the Willing, that Arab perspective on the war on Iraq is everywhere, even on Western outlets, 24 hours a day, courtesy of al-Jazeera and the new breed of unfettered Arab reporting that it has spawned. It is the very nature of that unfetteredness that causes the Coalition most alarm. The US Defence Department told Miles that "al-Jazeera is a political entity -definitely not balanced...

they are responsible for a lot of things that happen in Iraq. In some cases they were showing up before some horrendous things were happening." Indeed, during the US-led invasion, al-Jazeera had about 40 reporters dotted around Iraq and was often the only witness to the effects of the shelling and bombing whose outgoing fire was so extensively reported by the embedded reporters of the West.

Today the abiding criticism is focused on al-Jazeera's willingness to show raw footage of the bloody dismembered corpses of those caught in daily attacks in Iraq, footage that no Western television network will air. The Americans argue that the effect of the images, shown hour after hour in the Arab world, is to provoke not only anger but also acceptance of acts of increasing savagery.

Yet in the end one is forced to conclude that al-Jazeera and its cohorts are likely to have a far more profound affect on democracy, free speech and even freedom itself in the Arab world than any amount of pre-emptive military action.