

**Irish Times | Balancing bulletins in the desert****BY Bill McSweeney | January 22, 2005**

A tiny country inhabited by a few hundred thousand Arabs, Qatar is a bleak desert squeezed between Iran and Saudi Arabia "like a mouse sharing a cage with two rattlesnakes", as journalist Hugh Miles describes it.

Once an impoverished economy based on pearl fishing, it is now home to the largest natural gas field in the world and an army of immigrant workers from neighbouring states. Home also to the huge US military presence that provided the command centre of the coalition authorities and from which the invasion of Iraq was launched in March 2003.

With a pro-Western profile like that, it is odd to find that Qatar is also host, financial backer and indeed founder of the Arab media phenomenon, Al-Jazeera - the network of choice for Osama bin Laden to air his grievances and vent his hatred of the western values that modern Qatar appears to represent.

Hugh Miles sets himself the task of unravelling the puzzle and explaining how a bunch of unemployed technicians and journalists from Lebanon, Gaza and Qatar came together in 1996 to start an independent news network that today rivals the BBC in its coverage of Arab affairs.

The BBC was there at its creation. It was due to a failed venture between the British broadcaster and the Saudi government that 120 BBC-trained journalists found themselves out of a job at precisely the same time as the ruler of Qatar decided - for reasons not fully explained - to establish a satellite news channel for the Arab world. Emir Sheikh Hamad deposed his father in a bloodless coup in 1995 and immediately set about transforming Qatar from a comfortable backwater, subservient to Saudi Arabia, into an Arab version of Switzerland - wealthy, secure, and neutral. Al-Jazeera is a child of the Emir's wealth and an expression of his aspiration to neutrality. Its existence and its survival are dependent on the enlightened whim of this Eastern potentate, in a region notorious for rigid government control of all branches of the media.

Without another stroke of luck the new station might have pattered to an early halt, like so many media initiatives in the Middle East. Initially, the network's operations were limited to a six-hour slot broadcast on a weak satellite signal. By a freak incident of ungodly humour, however, its fortunes were transformed overnight.

French station Canal France Internationale, which occupied the only existing waveband capable of wide diffusion throughout the Middle East, had scheduled an education programme for children. Someone threw the wrong switch and 30 million Arab kiddies were treated to a programme of hardcore porn for half an hour. The Middle East gasped, the lease was withdrawn from the French and Al-Jazeera stepped forward to grasp its place in history. By the end of the 1990s it was the regional leader in news coverage, well-placed (and well-staffed) in the critical areas to exploit the challenge of September 11th and its aftermath.

The leadership of al-Qaeda saw in the Arab-based channel an opportunity to bypass the media outlets of the West and their Arab allies, and speak directly to an audience of 50 million

Arabs - over the heads and against the wishes of most of their rulers. This made the station an easy target for attack by the West, accustomed to the idea that the Arab world is corrupt beyond measure and its media are incapable of the competition in ideas that is the mark of Western democracy.

It is this perception of the Arab media as the puppets of dictatorial monarchs that has focused Al-Jazeera's journalists on the single-minded aim of displaying political neutrality at any cost. As long as everyone complains they are happy. Within a few years of operations, the station was accused of being anti- Israeli, pro-Israeli, the stooge of bin Laden, the pawn of Qatar and on the payroll of the CIA. It is hated by Syria and Saudi Arabia, its offices were bombed twice by US forces and it has been vilified by almost everyone for displaying the gruesome images of war during its coverage of the invasion of Iraq.

Yet, as Hugh Miles shows in this lively account, it was often the presence and courage of Al-Jazeera on the ground that corrected distortions of the news coming from embedded coalition journalists in Iraq. Fox News, eager to detect a Shia rebellion against Saddam in the early days of the war, announced gleefully that "the Shiites have hit the fan". On hearing the rumour, British forces unleashed a full-scale artillery assault on Basra. Al-Jazeera was in Basra, showing the images of civilian death, with no trace of the alleged rebellion that had provoked it.

"People did not want to believe that there could be a professional news organisation in the Arab world," said the network's PR, Jihad Ballout. But the Western criticism bothered him. "I can understand it in the Arab world. They had been living in virtual darkness for decades, being spoon-fed information. But the West, obnoxiously, felt an Arab couldn't produce a professional news bulletin, which was really frustrating."

Now the station's journalists have been banned from Iraq by prime minister Iyad Allawi. At the critical time of Iraq's first democratic elections, Al-Jazeera will be barred from reporting the issues and debates it dared to cover - too controversially for some - during the Iraq war.

The irony is that the corruptibility of the Arab world has been exploited for half a century by Western governments and interests. Middle Eastern dictators proved to be useful partners in the oil and arms deals they negotiated with the West. Democracy and the freedom of the press only became the major issue it is today when the Arab world bit back. Now we cannot - or will not - believe that Arab journalism is as capable of objective reporting as the BBC, CNN or Fox News.

Bill McSweeney teaches international politics at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin