

AL-JAZEERA -- HOW ARAB TV NEWS CHALLENGED THE WORLD.

THE best journalists -- and, yes, the best television networks -- are those censored and banned by dictatorial regimes. The BBC's World Service TV notched up an impressive record when it was blocked by the Chinese government -- with the full connivance of Rupert Murdoch, who was easily persuaded to stop Auntie from broadcasting from his Star satellite.

But the mother of all awards must go to Al-Jazeera, whose brief and turbulent existence is chronicled by young journalist Hugh Miles, who sat out the Iraq war monitoring the Arab news service from Sky TV's Osterley eyrie.

Al-Jazeera's record in receiving state banning orders is second to none. Yet its hard-won reputation for breaking original stories ensured that Sky was the first British network to strike a deal and offer the service to viewers.

The Arab station has been referred to as "Bin Laden's mouthpiece" by British tabloids -- not that this has stopped many established TV networks from forking out large sums for footage of the bearded medieval obscurantist, threatening fire and brimstone.

Closed by Yasser Arafat's Palestinian authority, accused by the Saudi's of "serving up poison on a silver platter", its offices made "collateral damage" by American firepower in Kabul and Baghdad, this Qatar-based channel has certainly made many enemies. It seems likely to make more. For, as the service prepares to set up an English-language service in America, Miles hints at its likely reception: "If they had the equivalent of what is on Al-Jazeera now in English in the US, I would mobilise the American government to destroy it," says Molly McKew, of the American Enterprise Institute.

Repeatedly, writes Miles, the channel's sponsor, the reform-minded ruler of Qatar, the Emir, Sheikh Al Thani, was taken to one side by American officials and asked to bring the channel to heel. Others in the administration are now more pragmatic. Condoleezza Rice has appeared on Al-Jazeera and the Bush administration seems to have come to the conclusion that it is better to work with the channel than against it.

Tony Blair apparently takes a more sanguine view, as well, having subjected himself to a grilling over the Iraq war that our tamed broadcasters couldn't equal, even if they wanted to.

Miles charts the rise of Al-Jazeera, reveals how it forged a reputation for infuriating both the Israelis and the Palestinian leadership during the Intifada and, more significantly, challenged much of the government-controlled media throughout the Middle East.

The first Arabic channel to talk to leading Israeli politicians, Al-Jazeera nearly pulled off a spectacular scoop, when Ariel Sharon agreed to be interviewed, but he pulled out at the last minute. "The point is," says Miles, that "Al-Jazeera has reversed the flow of information so that now, for the first time in hundreds of years, it passes from East to West. It is audience-driven rather than programmer-driven."

Al-Jazeera is still probably best known for its exclusive -- and immediately syndicated -- video messages from Osama bin Laden, although they are heavily censored by most American networks and carry the obligatory health warnings from British broadcasters, aware of their responsibilities but determined to maintain their own independence.

In a few months' time, British viewers, Arab and non-Arab alike, will have their own chance to decide whether Al-Jazeera is Bin Laden's mouthpiece, or if its planned focus on hard news, in-depth reporting and solid documentaries is a challenge to UK TV.