

12 August 2006

The Daily Telegraph

Arab women journalists take their place in front line of war reporting

By Hugh Miles in Cairo

THE war in Lebanon has for the first time placed Arab female journalists on the front line, while men have taken a back seat.

Al-Arabiya, al-Jazeera and a number of Lebanese satellite television channels all have several women reporting from the most dangerous zones of the four-week conflict.

Al-Arabiya has had two, Rima Maktabi and Najwa Qassem, on a hill overlooking the Israeli bombardment of a densely populated Shia district in Beirut.

Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar, has two female reporters in Lebanon, including Katia Nasser, and two in northern Israel.

Private Lebanese media outlets also have female reporters in the most hostile regions throughout the country, such as Bint

Jbeil, where Israeli troops have battled Hizbollah for weeks.

One Arab female journalist has already been killed. Layal Nejjib, a 23-year-old photographer for a Lebanese magazine, died after an Israeli rocket landed by her taxi in southern Lebanon.

"They are proving something, intentionally or not," said Ghayth Armanazi, a former Arab League ambassador to London.

He attributed the coverage by women to competition among Arab satellite companies to win viewers with fresh, attractive

faces, as well as to the gradual emancipation of Arab women generally. Al-Jazeera's target audience is Arab men over 25.

"There have always been women in Arab society who are quite avant-garde," said Mr Armanazi. "Nobody pushes them around."

Al-Jazeera acknowledged the trend for front-line female journalists but dismissed it as a

coincidence rather than deliberate. "I volunteered", said Katia Nasser, 32, a telegenic Lebanese reporter now usually seen sporting a blue helmet and matching flak jacket. "So I was dispatched to the Beirut bureau and then I went south. I am Lebanese and I prefer not to be in Doha in the newsroom. I prefer to be here. I am a journalist and this is my job." Nasser, who has won the heart of the Arab press, denied that she had anything to prove, but admitted that she did not tell her father that she was going to Lebanon. "I just surprised him when I headed through the south," she said. "I passed by my village when he was there and he was stunned to see me. "He did not say anything - he just knew I was like that since I was a small girl.'

