

27 April 2005

theguardian

Qatar draws up plan to sell off al-Jazeera

Jane Kinninmont in Doha

The Gulf state of Qatar is considering privatising its satellite TV channel, al-Jazeera, because of pressure from the US and a de facto advertising boycott by Arab countries offended by its critical coverage.

Reporters at the station fear that if the channel is privatised commercial pressures could force it to tone down its coverage.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of politics has embroiled Qatar in disputes with almost all of its neighbours, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

According to Wadah Khanfar, the station's director, the consultancy firm Ernst and Young has been hired to look into possible privatisation models, though he said no final decision had yet been taken.

Reporters fear that the power of advertisers and shareholders could lead to self-censorship if the channel is privatised. Because of its taboo-breaking coverage al-Jazeera has an audience of some 35-40 million but attracts few advertisers.

Saudi Arabia leads the de facto advert boycott, which al-Jazeera's head of business news, Ahmed Abdul Mohsen al-Qady, described as "the only thing the Arab information ministers can all agree on".

In the absence of ad revenues a government subsidy keeps the station afloat.

It is also feared that powerful Saudis would buy the station if shares were floated on Qatar's stock market.

The pan-Arab satellite station, founded in 1996, helped to start the Arab world's media revolution. Along with the internet, satellite television means autocracies can no longer monopolise the flow of information.

A viewer in neighbouring Bahrain said: "A critical station is something completely new in this region. We have never before had a TV programme or a newspaper that criticises the government."

Qatar is unapologetically pro-US, which is unusual in a region where rulers often denounce Washington to domestic audiences. It hosted US forces during the Iraq war.

But Washington objects to some of al-Jazeera's coverage, including that of al-Qaida, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iraq.

Hans Wechsel, regional director of the US state department's Middle East partnership initiative, said: "We have issues with them giving a platform to people who are calling for violence. It's not a matter of government interference, it's strictly an issue of ethics. After all, we raise ethical concerns with journalists in the US too."

But Hafez al-Mirazi, an Egyptian who runs the channel's Washington bureau, said: "The US must know that the country hosting their airbase is not funding al-Qaida. They just have a problem with us showing any civilian casualties in Iraq."

Mr Mirazi, who previously worked for Voice Of America, added: "The White House has been spoilt by Fox News. The current administration is unusually sensitive to any criticism. The situation now is 'either you're just like Fox, or you're against us'."

Some say the station represents a big step forward for Arab democracy, which Washington advocates. Mouafac Harb, director of al-Jazeera's less popular US-funded rival, al-Hurra, said: "Al-Jazeera has hijacked the role of the mosque as the primary source of information and views. Al-Jazeera is the only political process in the Middle East."

In a region where there is intense anti-US sentiment a private-sector al-Jazeera could well be more critical of the superpower.

At present the station invites US officials to put forward their point of view. Hugh Miles, the author of *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged The World*, said: "They have shown five hours of bin Laden's speeches in total - and 500 hours of Bush."

Qatar, a tiny emirate whose population is 700,000, was a minnow in regional politics until it discovered it was sitting on the world's third-biggest gas reserves.

Now the country is punching above its weight in Arab politics.

"Al-Jazeera put this country on the map," said Mr Qady, speaking in the Qatari capital of Doha. "Who had heard of Qatar before?"

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