

18 February 2006



Reaching Beyond Arab World

by Anton Harber

Johannesburg, Feb 17, 2006 (Business Day/All Africa Global Media via COMTEX) --

IN A small building in Doha, Qatar -- one of the very few modest constructions in a city of spanking new marble and glass skyscrapers -- a television revolution is being plotted. Broadcasting talent from around the world has been recruited to launch the global English-language channel of the controversial Arabic news station, al-Jazeera.

Al-Jazeera Arabic, the mother station, has in its 10-year existence had an extraordinary impact on the Middle East, and has been cited as the single most important nonstate player in the region. It is listened to like no politician in the region, and has achieved what most journalists aspire to -- a mixture of notoriety and grudging respect. Everybody seems to have a reason to hate or suspect it -- from the American right wing, who call it "Terror TV" because it is Osama bin Laden's outlet of choice, to Palestinians who have denounced it as a Mossad-CIA plot to divide the Arab world.

US President George Bush has been accused of discussing "taking it out". US forces have bombed al-Jazeera's offices in two cities. Two reporters have been killed and one is in his third year in the notorious US war prison at Guantanamo Bay. Another has been jailed in a Spanish trial that cited, inter alia, an interview he did with Bin Laden as evidence of links with al-Qaeda.

The Saudis and Americans have thrown hundreds of millions of dollars at rival television stations to try to reduce al-Jazeera's audience and influence. But their attempts have been doomed to failure, pitting dull, semi-official broadcasting against a station that loves controversy, dispute, argument and expose. Regional power-brokers curse the station as they queue to be interviewed, knowing that it is the most effective way -- maybe the only effective way -- to speak to the Arab and Muslim worlds.

A study by Professor Shibley Telhami at the University of Maryland of six Arab countries showed 50% of viewers saying al-Jazeera was the station they watched most for international news, way above the next best (MBC at 12%). Only 13% said they never watched the station.

In a region of bland, state-controlled television, al-Jazeera's motto, "The opinion, and the other opinion" means it has carried a range of views not usually seen or heard on air, especially those of Israelis and Arab dissidents. Most notorious are talk and phone-in shows that allow for views not seen in most media in that region.

They have also provided some of the most extensive news coverage. For example, they offered "probably the best coverage" of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza last year, running it live for about 48 hours and including interviews with the Israeli military and the settlers being removed, according to the author of a book about the station, Hugh Miles.

The Americans have taken issue with their use of Bin Laden tapes, and the Israelis have accused them of covering the Palestinian intifada in an inflammatory way, but Miles is adamant that the station is at least as balanced as, or no more unbalanced than, its western rivals.

Al-Jazeera journalists say they only run the few newsworthy minutes of each of Bin Laden's lengthy diatribes, and give much more airtime to Bush. The core group is BBC-trained and they speak with passion about their commitment to balance and independence and their role in opening up Arabic society to public debate. To do this in the regional lingua franca has sent shock waves through these closed and autocratic societies.

Al-Jazeera is, of course, in a unique position, neither a real commercial nor a real public service channel. It carries few advertisements, and enjoys the patronage and protection of the emir.

To understand the station, one has to understand the geopolitics of the Gulf. Qatar is small and its breathtaking wealth -- based on natural gas rather than oil -- came more recently than its neighbours. It is dwarfed by neighbourhood giants -- Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. When Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani overthrew his father to take control in 1995, he developed a multi-pronged strategy to build up and defend his tiny, vulnerable territory. He allowed the US to build two huge military bases (key jumping-off points for the Iraq war), and, with extraordinary vision, launched al-Jazeera. (It is a private company, but the principal shareholders and funders are the emir and his clan.)

With an investment of a few hundred million dollars, the station has given him regional clout and status way beyond what would otherwise be justified in this small piece of the desert. He has reached out to an Arab audience and, by doing so, made their leaders pay attention. He has had the foresight to see that to achieve this he has to give the journalists a relatively free hand. They don't often cover Qatar itself (arguing, disingenuously, that it is too small and insignificant to merit much attention) but they do enjoy provoking debate and discussion on tough issues in their neighbouring countries.

The station has already spawned al-Jazeera Sports and al-Jazeera Kids, and a documentary channel is planned. But the global English channel -- due to be launched in the next few months -- is the big step since it will project this little voice from a little country up against CNN, BBC, Sky and other global players.

It has chosen an unexpected route to achieve this. Rather than translate the Arabic channel, it has built a whole new structure -- it will report to the same board, but it is in a separate building and has a separate management and staff. Key personnel come from Sky and BBC, and less than 30% of staff are Arabic.

A unique element of its plan is to run the station from four centres -- Doha, Washington, London and Kuala Lumpur -- with the broadcast base moving from one to the other as peak television time shifts across the globe. This, they argue, will ensure their vision is more international than their British or American rivals. They will have 38 bureaus around the world.

It seems the emir wants to project a different voice to the world from the one he projects to Arabs.

This makes political sense, but it has also led to tension with those who run al-Jazeera Arabic, who fear the dilution of their powerful brand.

One has to wonder if the new station will build on the one factor that makes al-Jazeera so interesting -- its different perspective on the world -- in favour of some vague internationalism. Will it be different enough from CNN and BBC to be interesting? Will it give the world a new perspective, in the same way it has for the Arabic world? Is there such a thing as global perspective, as opposed to an American or Arab perspective of the globe? And will it shake up the world the way it has shaken up the Middle East?

In Doha last week, the station leadership moved between saying they wanted to be different and controversial like their mother station, but were adapting what was done for a global audience. On show was the contradiction of having a Qatar voice run by British and American experts. To answer journalists' questions about this new Arabic voice, they trotted out two stars of western television: David Frost, the BBC face of the 1980s, and Riz Khan, formerly of BBC and CNN.

The test, al-Jazeera's managers kept saying, will be what appears on air. I will be watching with nervous interest.

Harber is the Caxton Professor of Journalism at Wits University. He travelled to Doha as a guest of al-Jazeera.

All Africa Global Media

