

# THE NEW ARAB MEDIA PHENOMENON: QATAR'S AL-JAZEERA

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**O**n a visit to Doha, Egyptian President Husni Mubarak wanted to satisfy his curiosity about the most famous satellite TV station in the Arab world, one that has annoyed him and many other Arab rulers. It was past midnight when he arrived unannounced at al-Jazeera's studio, located in the compound that houses Qatari Radio and Television. After touring the station's compound, he turned to Safwat Sharif, leader of Egypt's vast media empire, and exclaimed: "All this trouble from a match box like this?"<sup>1</sup>

Nothing distinguishes al-Jazeera's modest studios from the hundreds of new buildings in Doha except its exceptional security measures and official procedures. Al-Jazeera is the first Arab TV station based on Arab soil that is expressly critical of Arab regimes and governments and even dares insult them occasionally. This paper will attempt to address several questions about this new phenomenon. How was al-Jazeera born and how did it become what it now is? What kinds of changes has it brought to Arab media, and what has been its impact on the Arab

people? What is the content of the programs which have made it famous? What are the criticisms leveled against it?

## EMIR HAMAD BIN KHALIFA AND THE NEW MEDIA IN QATAR

The foundation of al-Jazeera is best explained within the framework of a series of reforms instituted by the new emir of Qatar, Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, after his assumption of power in June 1995. A relatively young man of 44 when he replaced his father, Shaikh Hamad belongs to a new generation of Arab leaders more open to political and social ideas familiar in the West. To accomplish the transformation, the emir brought with him a new generation of Qatari leaders. The reforms have been not only political, but social and economic as well. The emir allowed all Qataris (men and women) to vote for members of an (advisory) Municipal Council (March 8, 1999). This was the first time women had been allowed to vote for members of any political body in any of the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emir-

ates).<sup>2</sup> The emir of Qatar has also announced his intention to hold general elections for an Assembly, the first of its kind in Qatar, and has formed a committee to produce a permanent constitution for Qatar by July 2002. One of the most significant reforms sponsored by the emir was abolition of censorship over the media in Qatar. This took final shape on March 30, 1998, with the abolition of the Ministry of Information, which had been responsible for media censorship.<sup>3</sup> This set free the press, radio and TV in Qatar and paved the way for al-Jazeera. This new freedom also allowed the Qatari press to compete to attract better journalists and a wider audience. Despite these reforms, however, there are still certain "red lines" for the Qatari press, and they rarely go beyond them. One is criticizing the ruling Al Thani family.

Qatar has both government and privately owned media. The government owns the Qatar Radio and Television Corporation; it also has a Department of Printing and Publications and a Qatari Press Agency, established in 1975. A National Council for Arts and Science, headed by Princess Mozza bint Nasr al-Misned, the wife of the emir, publishes studies and pamphlets. In the private sector, there are three daily newspapers in Arabic (*al-Sharq*, *al-Rayah* and the semi-official *al-Watan*), and two private newspapers in English (*The Gulf Times* and *The Peninsula*). Two privately owned monthly magazines are published in Arabic, (*Qatar al-Khair* and *al-Doha lil-Jamiah*). The TV satellite, al-Jazeera, is considered privately owned. Although the station is managed independently, it is not owned by private capital; the station still receives financial support from the government.

## THE BIRTH AND RISE OF AL-JAZEERA

Shaikh Hamad's motives for establishing al-Jazeera are not entirely clear. He apparently wanted a TV station reflecting the new image of Qatar that he wished to project to the outside world. The decree establishing al-Jazeera in February 1996 came less than a year after he assumed power,<sup>4</sup> and the station started broadcasting nine months later, on November 1, 1996. Initially, the idea was to modernize Qatari TV and to broadcast it via satellite. However, the Qataris decided instead to launch an entirely new TV channel via satellite to compete with the popular BBC channel. If one asks the Qataris where the idea for al-Jazeera originated, they quickly respond that it came from the emir himself. In fact, the concept was first put forward by Shaikh Hamad in August 1994, while he was still crown prince. Preparations to establish the channel started in February and March 1995. Initially, the emir considered a mix of entertainment and news, but he finally opted for an all-news station.<sup>5</sup>

A three-member committee was appointed to work on establishing the new satellite channel. It was composed of Adnan al-Sharif, a journalist; Muhammad Suhlawi, financial adviser to the emir; and Shaikh Hamad Bin Thamir Al Thani, under-secretary of the Ministry of Information. The committee flew to London, where they prepared a six-hour pilot program. It was later shown to the emir, and he liked it.<sup>6</sup> The committee then began contacting journalists, broadcasters and administrators to work for the station. In that same year (1996) a Board of Directors was appointed for the new station, through a decision of the Qatari Council of Ministers. This board is composed of seven

members appointed for terms of three years. It is composed of members of the new generation of Qataris, ranging in age from 34 to 47.

From the very beginning, some fortunate circumstances helped establish al-Jazeera on firm ground. In 1996, the Saudi-owned Orbit satellite station based in Rome scrapped a two-year-old deal to carry the signals of the BBC Arabic TV station. The rupture was caused by a dispute over coverage of two events that displeased the Saudis. The first of these programs featured a leading Saudi dissident. The second covered the funeral procession of a Saudi princess, an event that deeply offended the religious sensibilities of the Saudis and that they considered contrary to their conservative Wahhabi beliefs.<sup>7</sup> The Saudi-BBC dispute coincided with the establishment of al-Jazeera. Suddenly, hundreds of well-trained, professional Arab journalists, broadcasters and media administrators were out of work and available for recruitment. Al-Jazeera quickly signed contracts with some 120 of them. They were attracted by better salaries and promises of more freedom of expression in their programs and in coverage of the news. Thus al-Jazeera was founded from the first on "news coverage" as it is known in the West.<sup>8</sup> Some of the newly hired staff of al-Jazeera were retained in London; the rest were moved to Doha. Among the new recruits were two reporters who soon helped establish the two most popular programs on al-Jazeera: Faisal al-Qasim, who moved to Doha, and Sami Haddad, who remained in London.<sup>9</sup>

The station began broadcasting six hours a day, then increased this to twelve. Since January 1, 1999, al-Jazeera has been broadcasting 24 hours a day. It has built up

an impressive operation: 497 employees, 11 offices abroad and 38 foreign correspondents.<sup>10</sup> Each office abroad has at least two correspondents, if not more; some on permanent contract, others as freelancers. Al-Jazeera hires from all over the Arab world, including Iraqis, some of whom come directly from Iraq to work at the channel.

## THE AL-JAZEERA EXPLOSION

Al-Jazeera struck like lightning. In four years, the station has captured the attention of viewers from the Persian Gulf to North Africa.<sup>11</sup> Arabs all over the world who have satellite dishes faithfully watch their favorite programs on al-Jazeera, all conveyed in a widely comprehensible form of Arabic. Until the advent of al-Jazeera, Arabs did not pay much attention to the media in their own countries. They considered this information as little more than an extension of the views of their own governments, echoing official speeches and reporting on the activities of leaders. Many Arabs turned to the Western media for objective analysis. Three major broadcasting stations (in Arabic) became very successful: the BBC from London, the French Radio Monte Carlo and the U.S. Voice of America. Still, these three stations were considered foreign sources of information whose ultimate goal was to serve their own countries. Thus, they were easy targets of attack by anti-Western individuals and groups.

Al-Jazeera, however, is an Arab source, based in an Arab country, whose journalists and correspondents are all Arabs. Thus it was welcomed by the majority of its listeners. Many Arabs feel a sense of pride in having a genuinely Arab news channel. It quickly gained the trust

and admiration of its audience. Indeed, Arabs have quickly become "hooked" on its news coverage of Arab affairs, while its talk shows have become a centerpiece of discussion in society.

Before al-Jazeera, Arabs were not accustomed to TV discussions of sensitive political, social, economic and even religious subjects. Al-Jazeera's talk shows have hosted guests ranging from Arab heads of state and university professors to political opposition figures. A number of its Arab guests have criticized the traditional order in lively debates and heated arguments. Several shows also have call-ins, with questions and comments from listeners from all over the world. Iraqis, Palestinians, Saudis, Bahrainis, Libyans, Tunisians, Algerians and others, both supporting and opposing their own governments, have had their day on al-Jazeera, along with communists and Islamic fundamentalists. In four years, al-Jazeera has opened Arab eyes to a new, daring, frank and provocative medium. It has introduced programs that were previously unknown to the Arab masses.

Within two years of its establishment, al-Jazeera was recognized as the most influential Arab TV channel. Many times, al-Jazeera has achieved a scoop in covering events from hot spots as they happen. For example, it was the only TV station in the world allowed to broadcast live the bombardment of Baghdad by the United States and the United Kingdom during the so-called "Desert Fox" operation in December 1998. In 1999, al-Jazeera was the first to interview the exiled Saudi billionaire Usama bin Ladin from his hide-out in Afghanistan. In January 1999, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein chose al-Jazeera as the medium through which to

call on the people of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to rise up and overthrow their leaders, whom he accused of being "stooges of U.S. imperialism." For Saddam, airing his virulent speech on al-Jazeera was the best way to reach the Egyptian, Saudi and Arab publics. In October 2000, President Muamar Qadhafi of Libya chose al-Jazeera as the means to leak a draft of the final statement of the Arab League summit on the Palestinian intifada, even before the summit was convened in Cairo. In this way, he hoped to embarrass the Arab leaders over a statement he considered too weak. Today, al-Jazeera rivals CNN as a recognized international source of information. It is quoted by the international media, which appear to accept it as a valid and a reliable source.<sup>12</sup>

## AL-JAZEERA PROGRAMS

News is the central focus of al-Jazeera programming, broadcast every hour on the half hour, three of them extended reports of 65 minutes each. Sources are al-Jazeera's network of correspondents in 26 countries, as well as international news agencies. Global issues of the hour are also covered in several talk shows airing political, social, economic and religious topics. These are so popular that one, "*Bi La Hudud*" (Without Limits), in which guests discussed alternative medicine, had received 150 telephone calls by the end of the show.<sup>13</sup> Two famous and popular programs are shaking up the entire Arab world. The first is "*al-Ittijah al-Muakis*" (The Opposite Direction), anchored by Dr. Faisal al-Qasim. The second is "*al-Shariah wal-Hayat*" (Religion and Life), anchored by Yusif al-Qardhawi. Both programs are weekly, two-hour talk shows,

where well-recognized people of differing opinions engage each other in debate about topics of the day, including “values” issues. For two hours, participants grill each other while being examined by the host. Both shows receive calls from listeners around the world.

### **“THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION”**

This is undoubtedly the most popular and most controversial political talk show in the history of Arab television. Started by its host, Faisal al-Qasim, a Syrian with a doctorate from a British university, the program has been on the air since the inception of al-Jazeera in November 1996; by mid-May 2000, it had broadcast some 220 programs. Its success did not come easily. As Dr. al-Qasim explained:

“From the beginning, it was difficult for me to find people willing to participate in the program, and it took some time to develop the program to its present level.”<sup>14</sup> Among the most sensitive subjects debated have been inter-Arab conflicts, Arab conflicts with the international community, sanctions on Iraq, terrorism and political scandals.

Through this program and others, the Arab population has begun to hear, on the air, a new kind of discourse. For the first time, a TV station located in a conservative GCC country has guests talking about rulers in the Gulf as “lackeys of U.S. imperialism.” Guests have even charged Qatar with being hasty in establishing relations with Israel and blasted the policies

of the United States and Arab countries regarding sanctions toward Iraq. The idea of receiving direct phone calls on air was so new that some people accused the program of “fixing” the interviews in advance, including the questions received from listeners.<sup>15</sup> Dr. al-Qasim tries to provoke his guests as much as he can to extract sharply distinct reactions to his questions and comments. He does not hesitate, occasionally, to side with one or another of the guests or to provoke them. Sometimes guests scream at each other on the air. In many cases, the program has hosted opponents and supporters of an Arab regime. On one occasion, a guest became so angry that he walked off the set.

Faisal al-Qasim firmly believes that, through his program,

he is contributing something new to the mentality of the Arabs – the concept of debating ideas and issues. On this point he told me,

Dialogue is something missing among the Arabs. It is missing in schools, as much as it is missing everywhere else in the life of the Arabs. At home the father is a dictator. At work, the employer is a dictator, and in the life of the Arab countries, the political leader is a dictator. Through programs such as mine, we hope to implement new rules, those that educate the Arab human being to listen, not only to his own opinion, but to that of the other side as well. The debate-based media

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must enter in force and strongly in the political life of the Arabs, whether the Arab regimes like it or not.<sup>16</sup>

Al-Qasim's talk show was, and still is, the object of continuous debate among Arab intellectuals, as well as the Arab public. There are those who admire the program and call it an open forum of ideas or a democratic confrontation on issues. There are others who see in it a distortion of the basic idea of debate and nothing but an arena for a bull fight.<sup>17</sup> Faisal al-Qasim admits that his program is controversial. "I have been accused at the same time of being secular, a Communist, a Free Mason, a Zionist and an Arab nationalist . . . . I have also been accused of collaborating with the intelligence [service] of every country in the world except Togo and Burkina Faso."<sup>18</sup>

This program has involved Qatar in numerous disputes with Arab countries that have accused it of expressing ideas that directly oppose their rulers. This has happened, for example, with Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria. Several of these countries either withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, temporarily, or threatened to do so, accusing Qatar of condoning the activities of Faisal al-Qasim and his program.<sup>19</sup>

### **"RELIGION AND LIFE"**

Traditional Arab TV programs, particularly those in the Gulf, rarely discuss anything that mixes religion and politics. Egyptian TV has had some programs where clerics "preach" to the public on Islam and on public issues, but the audience for such programs has remained small and limited. For many years, from the mid-1960s until the mid-1990s, the Gulf had

audiences for a popular radio and TV program anchored by a Syrian-born Saudi *alim* (cleric), Ali al-Tantawi. He debated, in a lively manner, differing religious points of view on daily affairs and answered questions from viewers, adding his personal opinions and commentaries.

Now on al-Jazeera there is a new kind of religious program, the talk show, "Religion and Life," hosted by Yusif al-Qardhawi, a religious scholar and professor of Islamic religion at the University of Qatar. He brings more daring ideas to the debates that take place each week for two hours with guests who discuss from an Islamic point of view issues relating to the effect of modernization on the lives of Muslims. Among the issues discussed are Islamic government, sexuality and polygamy. Al-Qardhawi discusses without embarrassment certain sexual practices such as the circumcision of women. He also tries to show how Islam can be implemented in all aspects of modern life.<sup>20</sup> Dr. al-Qardhawi, who holds a Ph.D. from al-Azhar University in Cairo, plays his guests off against one another, pushing their limits, while also taking questions from spectators. Not everyone is pleased with this program. Some see it as advocating (through his guests) extreme ideas, such as defending traditional Islamic dress or polygamy. Some guests have even advocated forbidding or limiting work by women.

### **THE AL-JAZEERA AUDIENCE**

The president of Yemen, Ali Abd Allah Salih, is reported to have said, "I watch al-Jazeera more often than the Yemeni TV." People all over the Arab world, from heads of state to anyone who can afford a monthly cable fee, are watching it. In the relatively poor Gaza strip and the West

Bank, close to 40 percent of the Palestinians view al-Jazeera.<sup>21</sup> Arab intellectuals find it a refreshing change from the monotonous traditional fare they are usually offered. Al-Jazeera is also watched by millions of Arabs who have studied in the West and become accustomed to free-wheeling media. CNN can hardly compete with al-Jazeera in the Arab world because it broadcasts in English and because its programs are designed to please a Western audience. Al-Jazeera caters to the tastes and needs of the Arab viewer. The Arabic services of BBC, Monte Carlo and the Voice of America have seen a decline in listeners because of al-Jazeera.

### **AL-JAZEERA'S POLITICAL PROBLEMS**

Several Arab countries have expressed outrage at al-Jazeera and have held Qatar responsible for the programs it airs. While some Arab governments have chosen to register protests with the Qatari government, others have closed al-Jazeera offices in their countries and sent its personnel and correspondents home. In some cases, Arab countries have recalled their ambassadors to show their dissatisfaction with the TV station. Examples can be found from Morocco to Kuwait.<sup>22</sup> Jordan, for example, closed the offices of al-Jazeera in Amman from November 1998 to February 1999 after a guest on a debate program criticized the regime and stated his views of what the Jordanian people thought of their government.

In the first week of May 2000, the Qatari government heard complaints from three Arab countries at the same time: Iraq, Libya and Tunisia. Iraq was protesting al-Jazeera coverage of the extravagant celebrations of Saddam Hussein's birthday

while Iraq claimed that its people were dying from hunger because of U.N. sanctions. At the same time, Tunisia and Libya protested the fact that al-Jazeera hosted opponents of their regimes, and both recalled their ambassadors. In June 1999 a case arose that shocked the Persian Gulf countries. In a telephone call to a talk show, a viewer (presumably an Iraqi) criticized the emir of Kuwait, Jaber al-Ahmad Al Sabah. The Kuwaiti government took his words as a personal insult to the ruler and ordered the closure of the al-Jazeera offices. The Kuwaiti minister of information visited Qatar to express his government's outrage.

In these and similar cases, the Qatari reply has generally been that while the government of Qatar respects and sympathizes with this or that country, it has no direct control over the programs because al-Jazeera is privately owned. Tension between al-Jazeera and various countries usually calms down after a time, and the "offended" country begins to deal with the station once again. Al-Jazeera has become so powerful, valuable and influential that it is difficult for any given Arab country to boycott it permanently.

### **AL-JAZEERA'S FINANCES**

To enable al-Jazeera to function independently of the Qatari government, in 1996, Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani granted the station a one-time donation of 500 million Qatari riyals (\$137 million). The hope was that al-Jazeera would be able to establish itself and become financially independent within five years. Al-Jazeera was supposed to attract sufficient income from commercial advertisements to function autonomously. All indications are, however, that al-Jazeera has failed to

generate sufficient income and is still receiving financial aid from the government.<sup>23</sup> Like the rest of the Arabic satellite TV channels, al-Jazeera is very secretive about its budget. In the absence of official statistics, one can only attempt to estimate its cost of operations. The estimated fee for renting the use of satellite transponders is about \$4 million; the cost of producing programs must then be added. Production itself runs into tens of millions of dollars. The station has offices all over the world; in mid-May 2000 it had 497 journalists, broadcasters and staff on the payroll. One can only agree with the specialists on the subject, who claim that al-Jazeera could not function on less than \$40 million annually.<sup>24</sup> However, if al-Jazeera is still financially dependent on the Qatari government, the director of its administrative board, Shaikh Hamad Bin Themir Al Thani, sees the end of this dependency in the near future. He told me, "I expect that al-Jazeera will be able to finance itself in three or four years."<sup>25</sup>

Al-Jazeera hopes, when it is financially independent, to be incorporated as a private company and to sell its stock to the general public. Although this is a legitimate objective, it is difficult to see how al-Jazeera could become a completely private enterprise, given its difficulties in raising money from sources other than the Qatari government. Al-Jazeera's problems, however, are not merely financial; they are also political. In the Middle East, the ability to attract advertising is related to the satisfaction of relevant governments, the main advertisers on satellite TV. Al-Jazeera has less advertising than other stations, such as the Lebanese LBC or MBC or the al-Mustaqlil TV channel. Most of the TV advertising in the Persian

Gulf comes from the Saudi government and is aimed at having an impact on the populations of the GCC, other Arab countries or Arab communities in Europe and the United States.<sup>26</sup> Saudi Arabia buys little advertising on al-Jazeera. One reason is the political rift that exists between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, another is the dissatisfaction of Saudi Arabia with the liberalism of al-Jazeera. It has aired programs in which Saudi dissidents and Arab intellectuals attacked and criticized the Saudi regime and its leaders.

When al-Jazeera started to air programs, it gave a monopoly of its advertising business to a Saudi concern, al-Tuhama Advertising Company. Relations between al-Jazeera and the Saudis deteriorated to the point that al-Tuhama, under pressure from the Saudi government, cancelled its contract with al-Jazeera in February 1999. In January 2000 another company took over the advertising monopoly for al-Jazeera, Gulf Space International, based in Dubai and Doha. Al-Jazeera has a case pending in the Qatari courts against al-Tuhama for breach of contract. In addition to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait also discourages its citizens from advertising on al-Jazeera, for similar reasons.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to major TV channels in the United States, where programs are frequently interrupted by commercials, ads on al-Jazeera are rare and pass almost unnoticed. Today, al-Jazeera broadcasts only 40 to 45 minutes of advertising per day.

## HOW GOOD IS AL-JAZEERA?

The degree of praise and admiration that al-Jazeera has received has given way to almost the same degree of criticism. Some people believe that while al-Jazeera criticizes everyone else, it rarely criticizes

the Qatari government or Qatari leadership. In interviews with Qatari officials, this point arose more than once. The reply was always the same: Al-Jazeera has, on many occasions, criticized Qatari officials and foreign policies, even ministers in the Qatari government.<sup>28</sup> In order to emphasize their independence from the Qatari government, officials at al-Jazeera point to a play given in a Qatari theater in 1999, *Amjad Ya Arab* (Glories, Oh Arabs). In this play there was sharp criticism of the government. The play was so successful that the emir of Qatar personally came to the theater to view it and afterward met with the players and shook their hands.<sup>29</sup> Not everyone is convinced. During a crisis between Tunisia and Qatar in May 2000 over an al-Jazeera program that attacked the Tunisian government, a leading Tunisian newspaper, *al-Sabah*, questioned the "independence" of the station:

If al-Jazeera TV channel really believes in freedom in general and freedom of expression in particular, why has it not mentioned, even once, the fact that dish antennas are banned in Qatar? Why has it not mentioned that citizens and residents of Qatar can only use cable television that transmits a few channels selected and approved only by the Qatari authorities?<sup>30</sup>

Another criticism is that al-Jazeera, as a TV station, uses Western news agencies and Western standards. Some people claim that this leads to alienation from Arab society by offering programs that are not part of Arab culture, such as fashion shows and programs on makeup and the use of perfume.<sup>31</sup> Al-Jazeera tries to promote itself as an inter-Arab TV station, a unifying force for Arabs. But some

people see it as a tool, exploiting divisions in the Arab world, increasing regionalism, and diverting Arabs from their identity. In this vein, one viewer has written:

The Arab atmosphere today is more susceptible to divisions and contradictions. These contradictions work to strengthen the frontiers among Arab countries, and any new frontiers will work against a unified Arab identity in favor of regionalism. Al-Jazeera talk shows are spreading animosities and feelings of revenge between one Arab and his brother-Arab. As a result these two Arabs will be divided after certain talk shows between supporters of this or that Arab country, because of people who are guests of this or that talk show.<sup>32</sup>

Between May 8 and 9, 2000, al-Jazeera organized a special, closed seminar in Doha to evaluate its performance. Several top officers of al-Jazeera and guests from Qatar and abroad attended by invitation. Although not very much was published about the viewpoints expressed, it appears that several participants accused al-Jazeera of looking for sensationalism and exaggerating situations. Al-Jazeera was accused of describing or reporting things that never took place in a way that made it seem as though they really happened. These critics accused al-Jazeera of manipulating events and choosing images and footage that distorted the facts.<sup>33</sup> Finally, some people point to many talk shows in which the guests use abusive and even insulting language against each other. In some cases guests engage in shouting matches that leave the viewer unable to follow the debate or understand what is being said.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Several factors have contributed to the phenomenal success of al-Jazeera. First, it is not simply a satellite TV channel. In the Arab world it has become the news itself, as people and the press discuss almost daily its programs and the effect they have. The official logo of al-Jazeera, *al-rai wa rai al-akar* (the opinion and the opposite opinion) has started to become a political slogan, accepted by many Arabs, in favor of respecting the beliefs and ideas of others and discussing them peacefully. Its success, therefore, is primarily due to the unlimited freedom the station exercises in comparison with other Arab TV stations. There are very few red lines in its programming, reporting and commentary. Second, the station has a unique collection of capable and experienced Arab journalists, broadcasters and staff. Most speak perfect English as well as Arabic. This helps explain the dynamic and efficient way al-Jazeera is managed, a far cry from the usual Arab bureaucratic lethargy. Third, al-Jazeera was the first Arab TV station to introduce major innovations in broadcasting and reporting. This has built an ever-increasing number of faithful and enthusiastic viewers.

Other Arab TV stations are beginning to open up, trying to introduce programs comparable to those on al-Jazeera. Even conservative Saudi Arabian TV has started to be more open. Several Arab countries have launched their own satellite TV stations, including Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Syria. Abu Dhabi also has an increasingly successful satellite TV station. The only other TV station in Arabic that is seriously challenging al-Jazeera is the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), followed by Arab News Network (ANN), the latter

belonging to Rifaat al-Asad, the uncle of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad.

It is possible that the example of al-Jazeera has caused some Arab countries to start rethinking their policies toward freedom of the media. At the beginning of this year, Egypt, for example, opened a "Media Free Zone" near Cairo, where foreign TV stations can broadcast whatever they wish without any censorship from the Egyptian government. Al-Jazeera seized the opportunity and in March 2000 opened a major office in the zone after signing an agreement with the Egyptian government. There is also talk about opening a media free zone in Jordan, and in October 2000 Yemen announced its intention to follow suit.<sup>35</sup>

The success and expanding influence of al-Jazeera, however, is limited by the fact that it is a satellite TV station. People have to pay for cable TV, if such facilities exist in their country. This excludes the large segment of the population who cannot afford to pay the fees. As for al-Jazeera's plans for the future, one is a second channel exclusively devoted to documentaries. The second is a special channel in English that will transform it into an international TV channel.

Is al-Jazeera simply a round-the-clock news station, or does it have a special message it wants to convey to the Arab people? In response to this question, the head of the board of directors of al-Jazeera, Shaikh Hamad Bin Themir Al Thani responded, "Sure! Yes! The message of al-Jazeera is to get Arab spectators and Arab regimes accustomed to hearing the opinions of all parties, and especially the opposing ones. This is a mission by itself in contemporary Arab history."<sup>36</sup>

Al-Jazeera's relations with the Qatari government require some reflection. Although al-Jazeera claims that it is independent, it is clear that this independence has its limits. It rarely criticizes the government, and then only timidly. Al-Jazeera cannot be too independent as long as the Qatari government pays its bills. On the other hand, the Qatari government allows al-Jazeera a high degree of independence in programming that has nothing to do with Qatar.

However, if circumstances appear to be going in al-Jazeera's direction, a word of caution is necessary. In reality, al-Jazeera still stands on somewhat shaky ground. It remains completely dependent, financially and otherwise, on the emir of Qatar, Hamad Bin Khalifah Al Thani, and his foreign

minister, Hamad Bin Jasim Bin Jabr Al Thani. Any serious domestic political change in Qatar, such as instability in the ruling family or even a change of government – though currently unexpected, always a possibility – would impact al-Jazeera. Without strong support from the emir and political will to continue this media experiment, al-Jazeera could fall prey to external pressure to curtail its aggressive style. Over time, such pressure could leave it weakened; this would result in a loss of its appeal to Arabs outside of Qatar. A new and different leader could even close al-Jazeera, saving himself and the Qatari government a continuous source of trouble. That would be a serious loss for media freedom and the potential for a more open Arab society that this experiment represents.

<sup>1</sup> David Hir, "The Television Studio Arab Leaders Hate the Most," *Chicago Tribune*, April 9, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed study of the elections to the Municipal Council, see Louay Bahry, "Elections in Qatar," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 4, June 1999, pp. 118-127.

<sup>3</sup> Louay Bahry, "A Qatari Spring," *Middle East Insight*, Vol. 15, No. 3, September-October 2000, pp. 39-44.

<sup>4</sup> The Qataris had been thinking about introducing a new type of TV broadcast even earlier. In January 1996, Qatari TV offered a sort of prototype for al-Jazeera, when two leading opposition figures from Bahrain publicly expressed views against the Bahrain government. This program was perceived as a dramatic innovation in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf. It was the first time that a TV program in any GCC country had expressed criticism of the government of a member state. The two debaters were Dr. Mansur al-Jamri and Shaikh Ali Salman, then both living in exile in London.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Shaikh Hamad Bin Thamir Al Thani, chairman of the Board of Directors of al-Jazeera, Doha, May 15, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Ghareeb, "New Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Summer 2000, p. 405.

<sup>7</sup> The BBC had been receiving 100 million Saudi riyals (\$26.66 million) a year from the Saudi government. Eliminating this subsidy was a considerable blow to the BBC.

<sup>8</sup> *Khalij News*, Abu Dhabi, April 16, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> The name al-Jazeera was chosen "because it means the peninsula (al-Jazirah-l-Arabiyyah), . . . of which Qatar is an important part" (interview with Shaikh Hamad Bin Thamir, Doha, May 15, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Al-Jazeera has offices in Tehran, Baghdad, Ramallah, Cairo, Kabul, Sanaa, Khartum, Moscow, Paris, London and Washington, DC. The most important office abroad is London (Called Studio Number 2), which is staffed with some 25 employees (interview with Salah Najim, Doha, May 15, 2000). Salah Najim is head of programs at al-Jazeera.

<sup>11</sup> Faisal al-Qasim told this author that there are more people watching al-Jazeera in North Africa than in the Persian Gulf.

<sup>12</sup> In a recent example of this recognition, *The Washington Post* referred to al-Jazeera as its source in reporting on an Israeli military raid on a stronghold of the Islamic Palestinian group, HAMAS. The attack took place in Nablus, on the West Bank (*The Washington Post*, August 27, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Abd Allah Ibrahim al-Haj, assistant general manager, al-Jazeera, Doha, May 16, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Faisal al-Qasim, Doha, May 8, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Jawad, "The Direction that is no Longer Opposite," *al-Hayat* (London), September 25, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Faisal al-Qasim interview.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad Jawad, "The Direction that is no Longer Opposite," *al-Hayat*, September 25, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Faisal al-Qasim interview.

<sup>19</sup> The program, "al-Ittijah al-Muakis," is the subject of at least two books in Arabic, both of them by a Saudi university professor, Dr. Sulaiman Jazia al-Shammari. The first is *Burnamaj al-Ittijah al-Muakis* [The Opposite Direction Program] (Doha: Dar al-Sharq, 1998). The second is *al-Buad al-Qawmi fil Qannat al-Jazeera* [The National Dimension in al-Jazeera Channel] (Doha: Dar al-Sharq, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Dr. al-Qardhawi is a well known Sunni scholar advocating modern, flexible, Islamic ideas, and he has many followers in the Arab world.

<sup>21</sup> Ehud Yaari, <http://www.JerusalemReport.Com>, "The Al-Jazeera Revolution," March 23, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> One of al-Jazeera's officials told this author that one Arab ambassador told him that he is not the ambassador to Qatar but the ambassador to al-Jazeera, due to the frequency of his visits to the station. Another told the same source that even while he is presenting an official protest to al-Jazeera, he personally agrees with what al-Jazeera is saying about his country and encourages the station to continue to broadcast in all frankness.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Abd al-Aziz Ibrahim al-Mahmud, editor-in-chief, *al-Sharg*, Doha, May 3, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Alterman, *New Media, New Politics: From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy) 1998, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Shaikh Hamad Bin Thamir Al Thani, head, Board of Directors, al-Jazeera, Doha, May 15, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Saudi Arabia now controls a network of Arabic newspapers and magazines. It controls advertisements and press agencies. All this gives Saudi Arabia advantages in controlling the advertising industry in the Arab world.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Ali Kamal, director of marketing, al-Jazeera, Doha, May 16, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> An example was criticism by al-Jazeera of Israeli participation in the Economic Summit Conference held in Doha in November 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Abd Allah al-Haj interview.

<sup>30</sup> *Al-Zaman* (Arabic daily), London, May 15, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Edmund Ghareeb, "New Media," p. 410.

<sup>32</sup> Husni Abu al-Maali, *al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), June 16, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> *Al-Watan* (Qatari daily), Doha, May 9, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Dr. Ahmad Abd al-Malik, professor of communications, Qatar University, Doha, May 13, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> The whole concept of such a zone came under severe pressure when the Egyptian information minister attacked al-Jazeera's coverage of the Arab Summit Conference in Cairo, held in October 2000, and Egypt's policy during and following the conference. The minister stated: "Al-Jazeera is launching a demagogic attack against Egypt . . . and I am considering certain steps, such as cutting all ties with al-Jazeera, including its studios and its correspondents . . . I hope I will not have to take such measures." *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), October 27, 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Shaikh Hamad Bin Thamir Al Thani interview.