

Extract from
AL JAZEERA. HOW ARAB TV NEWS CHALLENGED THE WORLD

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First published in 2005 by Abacus

ISBN 0 349 11807 8

Seeking Arabic-speaking staff with television news experience, Al-Jazeera profited hugely at the very start from an aborted joint Saudi-BBC attempt to establish a similar kind of service. In the early nineties a prince, a cousin of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, had set up a satellite television company called Orbit. To have access to European technicians and talent and avoid the kind of government interference that might arise if it were based in an Arab country, the prince decided to base Orbit's operations in Rome. In addition to offering nineteen television channels to paying subscribers, the company approached the BBC to supply an Arabic version of the BBC World Service [television] news. For a long time the World Service had been available in the Middle East in English, but this was to be the first time that a television news channel of this sort had been available in Arabic.

Before agreeing to supply Orbit with its Arabic-language news channel, the BBC insisted the new channel should have the same values as the rest of the World Service. 'If someone wants the BBC they have to take it as it is. Culturally sensitive, yes; but journalism on bended knee, no,' said a BBC spokesman at the time. On 24 March 1994 the BBC and Orbit's Saudi backers signed a ten-year agreement which, on paper at least, looked set to benefit both parties. But there were suspicions that the cultural differences between them would result in disaster. The Arab press wrote off the whole project from the start, dubbing it 'the BBC's Petrodollar Channel'.

Broadcast from the BBC studios in West London, the new Arabic BBC news service grew incrementally from two hours of broadcasting a day at the start to eight hours by the end of 1994. But it was not long before the relationship fell apart over the perennially sticky issue of editorial control. There had been growing friction over what should be broadcast, before a blistering row in 1996 proved cultural differences in this instance to be insurmountable. Angry telephone conversations and board meetings revealed that what had been meant by 'cultural sensitivities' turned out to mean editing anything with which the Saudi royalty disagreed.

The final controversy came in two stages, and the first revolved around a Saudi dissident called Professor Muhammad Al-Mas'ari. Al-Mas'ari was the head of the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights, an influential Islamic organization, banned in Saudi Arabia and based in Britain, which vehemently opposes the House of Saud. Since his expulsion from the kingdom, Al-Mas'ari had campaigned relentlessly against the Saudi royal family, calling for strict Islamic rule instead.

In January 1996 Al-Mas'ari debuted on Orbit's BBC Arabic service, but halfway through his interview a mysterious and timely blackout occurred, embarrassingly ending the transmission. Although Orbit denied it, besides the BBC they were the only ones who could have stopped the broadcast, by cutting the power from Orbit's central command in Rome. The BBC was furious, accusing Orbit of censoring its broadcasts and breaking their agreement, which had granted the BBC complete editorial control. The BBC was faced with the painful decision of pulling out of the deal with Orbit or compromising its editorial independence. It settled on the latter.

The Saudis were furious too, that Al-Mas'ari had been on Arab screens in the first place, and a storm erupted between the British and Saudi governments. The Saudi Ministry of Information instructed hotels in the kingdom not to broadcast any Orbit channels at all and the Saudi Ambassador insisted on Al-Mas'ari's immediate deportation from Britain, thus ending his media campaign against his homeland. If Britain refused, he warned, Saudi Arabia would terminate arms contracts worth billions of pounds, putting thousands of jobs at risk. Shamefully, Prime Minister John Major and Home Secretary Michael Howard acquiesced to the Saudis' demands and agreed to deport Al-Mas'ari to the Caribbean island of Dominica. But, to the deep embarrassment of the British government, Al-Mas'ari successfully appealed against the judgement in court. The British press condemned John Major for sacrificing Al-Mas'ari's human rights on the altar of Saudi arms deals.

The second and final blow to the relationship came a few months later when a BBC *Panorama* documentary entitled *Death of a Principle* was highly critical of Saudi Arabia's human rights record. Aired uncut in Arabic on Orbit's BBC service, the programme revisited the Al-Mas'ari affair and dynamited any

chance of a reconciliation. It showed a Saudi funeral, a Filipina living in Saudi Arabia who testified in an interview to having been flogged for going out with male friends and, most controversially, a man about to be decapitated by a sword-wielding executioner. Although the actual moment of beheading was not shown, filming executions is illegal under Saudi law. 'This programme was a sneering and racist attack on Islamic law and culture,' said Orbit's president. The BBC Arabic service was abruptly switched off on the night of Saturday 20 April 1996, eighteen months after it had begun. A week later it was replaced with the Disney Channel.

At first the BBC thought that the show might go on, if only another rich but slightly more liberal Arab sponsor could be located. After all, the operation had been conducted from the BBC studios in London. But Orbit, it emerged, was determined to obstruct any new BBC Arabic project and was formidably placed to do so. Orbit's Saudi financiers were so influential that they had a stranglehold on any potential backer who ever wanted to do business in the Middle East again. Nor, after the recent scandal, was the British government in any hurry to help the BBC get the channel up and running again.

As if this panoply of obstacles was not enough, Orbit also owned all the computers and technical equipment that the BBC Arabic service had been using. The company had supplied the lot at the start, on the understanding that this was somehow more tax-efficient, and now it exercised its right to do absolutely nothing with it all, and not let anyone else either. The purpose built digital studio was left empty and unused on the BBC's premises while executives spent a few fruitless weeks trying to strike a new deal.

The sudden closure of the Arabic channel left about 250 BBC-trained Arab journalists, broadcasters and media administrators out of a job. They were also out of a dream, for they had shared a vision that the Arabic service was going to make a difference in the Arab world by setting a higher standard than the tawdry and venal reporting of state television news. Offered the opportunity to work on a news channel without the same editorial reservations, 120 of them swiftly signed up with Al-Jazeera, which had just been established. Approximately a quarter of the total number of Al-Jazeera's employees were Qataris, the rest were drawn from all over the Arab world. Many were Palestinians, perhaps because Palestinians tend to be better educated and travel more than other Arabs. Palestinians are well represented among Arabs in other news organizations too, including the BBC.

Many of these journalists went on to become some of the most familiar faces on Al-Jazeera. If the winner in this affair was Al-Jazeera, the losers, in the short term at least, were the tens of millions of Arab viewers who had just begun to acquire a taste for quality, independent news in Arabic when it was abruptly taken away from them.

'The BBC Arabic service was the beginning,' Mostefa Souag told me. He worked for the Arabic station from the day it opened to the day it closed. 'For the first time Arabs had the chance to watch Arab journalists doing the news and making programmes to the same standards as Western news channels.' Although the Arabic service was in part a foundation for Al-Jazeera, as Souag points out there were also some important differences between the two. 'The BBC project was different: the audience was very limited, because the channel was not free,' he explained. 'We were broadcasting just eight hours a day and it never ran long enough to create the kind of impact that Al-Jazeera has had. Al-Jazeera, on the other hand, broadcasts twenty-four hours a day, has a large audience and is free in most places, especially in the Arab world. It's broadcast from an Arab capital, in an Arab country and managed by Arabs themselves: the BBC was none of these things. Al-Jazeera was the first time Arabs discovered it was possible to have an Arab institution that they could respect.'

The collapse of the BBC Arabic service was an emotional time for its staff, many of whom were left in limbo. Souag, who had been a professor of English literary theory at Algiers University between 1985 and 1993 before working for Saudi Arabia's MBC, had dropped everything to be part of the BBC Arabic project. His story was typical: in October 1994 he had left a good job for the promise of a new life with his young family in London, attracted by the prospect of a career with the BBC, a company which carries tremendous prestige in the Arab world. All the staff were told they could expect to be employed for at least ten years. When the venture fell through after just eighteen months, many had already bought homes or were in the process of exchanging contracts on them. The dramatic demise led to huge personal problems. Many of the staff were no longer entitled to stay in Britain, while others, like Souag, had young children who were settled into school. No one at the time could have guessed that the ashes of the BBC project would turn out to be the most solid of foundations for Al-Jazeera.