



< THE EXTERIOR OF EXCELLENCE >

THE ARABIAN BEACON

Qatar's Growth into the Bastion of Global Communication



>>> Before 1995, Qatar was not known for its great strides in communication. In fact, the nation, which today stands as the quintessential example of growth and change, was then closed; its doors locked, its windows shut, unable to release its ideas into the greater ether of globalised communication. Little did anyone expect that, through discovery, victory and a little bit of luck, the small peninsula that juts into the Arabian Gulf would become one of the greatest modern media beacons. The story of Qatar's modern communication is not new. It is told in the soft hoofbeats and hushed voices of tradition, written by the hurried hand of change and circulated by the ambition of modernity. This is that story.



◀ THE TRADITIONAL CAMEL WALK, "DARB AL SAAI" STILL PERFORMED TODAY ▶

THE PAST, THE PRESS AND THE PARADIGM SHIFT

We begin with H.E. Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani. As the first internationally recognised sovereign of Qatar after the Ottoman occupation, it was his sworn duty to convey classified messages to and from his place of rule. As was tradition, Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani often ordered his men to alight the coarse backs of camels and ride through 50 kilometers of perilous terrain to hand deliver his most important state correspondence. Known as Darb Al Saai or "the way of the Messenger," this tradition of camel-back communication had been practiced for years, beginning as a way for nomadic tribes to convey messages with each other, and continued during even the most trying periods of Qatar's history. In fact, the route is still celebrated today in a ceremony most often performed during Qatar National Day, but it no longer holds the same dangers of yesteryear. As Moez Al-Agha, one of the key members of the National Day Organising Committee said, "[Sheikh Jassim's rule] was a time of tribal wars on land and piracy and pillage at sea. It was a time that witnessed the retreat of the Ottoman Empire and the growing influence of the British Empire in the region. Interests and loyalties were shifting; conflicts and disorder were spreading anew in the the Gulf region, but Sheikh Jassim, with God's help and the support of the Qatari people, withstood these storms and momentous changes." What rose from the embers of this fiery period was a tempered national dedication to communication. In 1969, twenty years after the rule of Sheikh Abdullah, the very first Department of Information was established in Qatar in order to mediate the growing level of domestic and international communication in the country. Ever the industrious go-getters, the press pre-dated this official governing body by eight years in 1961, when a printed gazette presented the latest royal decrees from the Emir. Throughout the years, the State saw the creation of other publications in printed media with the birth of newspapers such as The Gulf Times and The Peninsula,

both of which still exist today. Radio followed shortly thereafter in Qatar in 1968 and flourished in a growing number of broadcast languages in the years to come. Then came the inevitable introduction of television in 1970, with a rudimentary station that broadcast only a few hours a day in black and white. With the establishment of not only colour television and linguistically-diverse programming a decade later, Qatar was well on its way to realising its modern potential. These historic and technical innovations had a hand in the State's transformation into a global communications player, that is beyond doubt, but they were still largely controlled by the ruling government and lacked the freedoms of other countries' domestic broadcasters. The true media revolution in Qatar happened many years later, thanks to its biggest and most visible testament to worldwide communication: Al Jazeera.



◀ TAKING A BREAK: QATAR'S TRADITIONAL WAY OF COMMUNICATION ▶



< THE AL JAZEERA NEWSROOM >

AL JAZEERA: AT THE PRECIPICE OF PROGRESS

The Island. The Peninsula. However you choose to translate it, Al Jazeera is the Middle East's one and only global media communications giant and, despite its name, is anything but secluded from the rest of the wider world. In fact, since its historic launch in 1996, the channel has spread its wings across the planet. From its base right here in Doha, Al Jazeera transmits its homegrown signal to hundreds of millions of viewers, thirsty for what has become an alternative to the mainstream drivel of modern televised news. However, it is not without its detractors or bouts with controversy. It is not only one of the world's most famous news stations, but also one of its most infamous.

Its history begins in 1995, when then Crowned Prince of Qatar, His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, took the reigns of history and overthrew his father's rule in a bloodless coup. He was driven to galvanise his country and break its longstanding presence as an insular society by cultivating domestic interest in culture, art and media and opening its doors to growing foreign interest. The BBC was already established in Qatar, but quickly lost steam after its Saudi-based funding fizzled out. Wanting to not only fill the gap left behind by the British media outlet, but also to locally establish one worthy of Qatar's newly realised ambitions, His Highness the Emir quickly picked up the shattered remains of the BBC and reformed it into the region's first viable Arabic news station, Al Jazeera. This new creation would exemplify Qatar's growth as an open society by establishing a new idea of quality and allowing freedoms not yet realised by other television stations in the region. It was a transition

that became indicative of Qatar's grasp for global glory, and one that had a speed met only by its boldness. Its first salvo of condemnation came from neighboring states, which thought it was too open and too outspoken. Even in its earliest days, it faced rebukes, bans, boycotts and sudden judgements, like Algeria's government allegedly cutting the power supply so that an indicting Al Jazeera report could not be shown. And yet, despite its many battles, it continued to grow, gaining notoriety, renown and accolades from across the Arab world.

As its popularity expanded, so too did its signal. Its new approach to news in the Middle East was consumed hungrily by the multiple populations whose world view had been skewed or blocked outright by the media control of their governments. Al Jazeera does not pull its punches when it comes to candid, hard-hitting journalism, and it is that very mentality which produces the acclaim of its audience and the ire of its critics, both of whom were growing in number. When it eventually hit the West in the late 90s, it already had a reputation for its style, but in the early days of the new millennium, it began simultaneously impressing and angering a whole new viewership. In an effort to show each side of every story and conflict, it began showing statements from Al Qaeda leaders, and shortly after that, in 2003, the ravages of the war in Iraq. Western audiences were not used to this kind of exposure, particularly from such a scathing viewpoint, and it immediately drew a reaction. However, the reaction was not altogether negative, because three years later, Qatar's favorite media son continued its extension across markets, countries and even languages.



Thanks to growing interest, in 2006, Al Jazeera launched its English language station to better accommodate its new Western audience. And so it did, better than anyone expected. Now in its third year, the 24-hour English channel is available throughout the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas. Reportedly reaching an impressive 100 million households, Al Jazeera English is amongst the top three largest news outlets internationally, a list which also includes heavyweights BBC World and CNN International; not bad for a station that should, by all accounts, still be taking its infant steps. In an effort to tap into new media, Al Jazeera English employs the internet to great success, with a website full of programmes and its own YouTube channel. This breadth of distribution helps the outlet reach the few countries that continue to unjustly accuse it of strengthening the voice of insurgency. Even with criticism for its objectivity, there is no denying Al Jazeera's worth as an established entity, particularly considering the collection of awards it has garnered for its programmes and documentaries. The station even won the prized Golden Nymph award for Best 24 Hour News Programme in 2008.

In any language, Al Jazeera has come a long way, and has grown meteorically from brainchild to behemoth in the span of just a few years. It has played an important role in covering with aplomb some of the most volatile and pressing situations in recent years. It was instrumental in its coverage of conflicts around the Middle East region and the world, and most recently boasted the only presence by an

international media outlet during the War in Gaza. Just like nearly every other TV station, they often receive a litany of negative press. Of course, as the old saying goes in this business, any press is good press.



THE PEACE PRECEDENT

Qatar's influence within the global sphere does not end with its steadfast devotion to the promotion of unbiased truth, but is also deeply invested with an equally important concept: the communication of peace. In recent years, Qatar has played an active role in not only purveying communication to the world, but also taking up a greater sense of social and political responsibility. The Doha Debates have been an institution in Qatar since 2004, and have openly addressed issues such as racial and gender equality, the separation of church and state and political transparency. The series has hosted leading thinkers in nearly every sociopolitical field and some of the highest-ranking politicians in the world, including Israeli President Simon Peres, former Interim Prime Minister of Iraq, Ayad Allawi, and former American President, Bill Clinton. Championing the freedom of Qatar communication, the Debates are completely independent and as such, may address even the most taboo subjects with a great sense of impunity. There are few events in the Gulf that have transmitted such a breadth of free and impartial communication as the Doha Debates, and it is a true testament to the city that it would attach its name to such a diverse intellectual showcase. Along with the Debates, Qatar has, in recent years, been at the forefront of facilitating the communication of not only ideas, but also of dialogue between nations for the interchange of ideas. The country has grown into a long-fated

influence, and has taken the lead in the communication of peace. There are many examples of Doha serving as a meeting place for peaceable discussion between warring nations or regions, but there are a few that stick out in recent memory. The first of these was in May of last year, when Qatar's mediation between the political factions in Lebanon led to a governmental unity and peace that has lasted to this day. The State was credited by many international agencies for "finding the needle in the haystack" that led to this much needed communication. Another example of Qatar attempting to foster communication within the Arab world was the emergency Arab League Summit held in Doha to address the most recent Israeli offensive on the Gaza strip. The summit included quite a few governmental organisations and factions not often given a voice on the global scene, particularly the democratically elected, yet internationally decried Hamas. Throughout a very short period, Qatar has completely changed the way it communicates both internally and to the outside world. What began as a treacherous flight against blustery winds and across hot sands is now an equally harrowing digital quest through pulsing airwaves and snaking fibre-optic cables. And yet, while technologies have changed and scopes have widened, that uniquely Qatari commitment to communication remains, and indeed motivates the nation to grow further into the waiting world, fulfilling its destiny as the one, true Arabian beacon.



HASSAN IBRAHIM Q+A

You have been in the journalism field for over 30 years, covering many world-changing issues across the globe, and are seen as an expert on geopolitical and sociological issues in the world scene. With all of that experience, what made you decide to join Al Jazeera? Why was it so important to you?

I was one of the original crew that joined Al Jazeera from the BBC. To be honest I never thought Al Jazeera would blossom so quickly; but it was a challenge to broadcast real journalism from the Arab World. I joined because of the promise made to us by Al Jazeera management that our impartiality and professionalism were sacrosanct.

Al Jazeera has been a media presence now for over 10 years and it is still growing. In your opinion, what has made Al Jazeera so popular in this modern world otherwise saturated by varying options of televised news? What are its strengths and what sets the station apart?

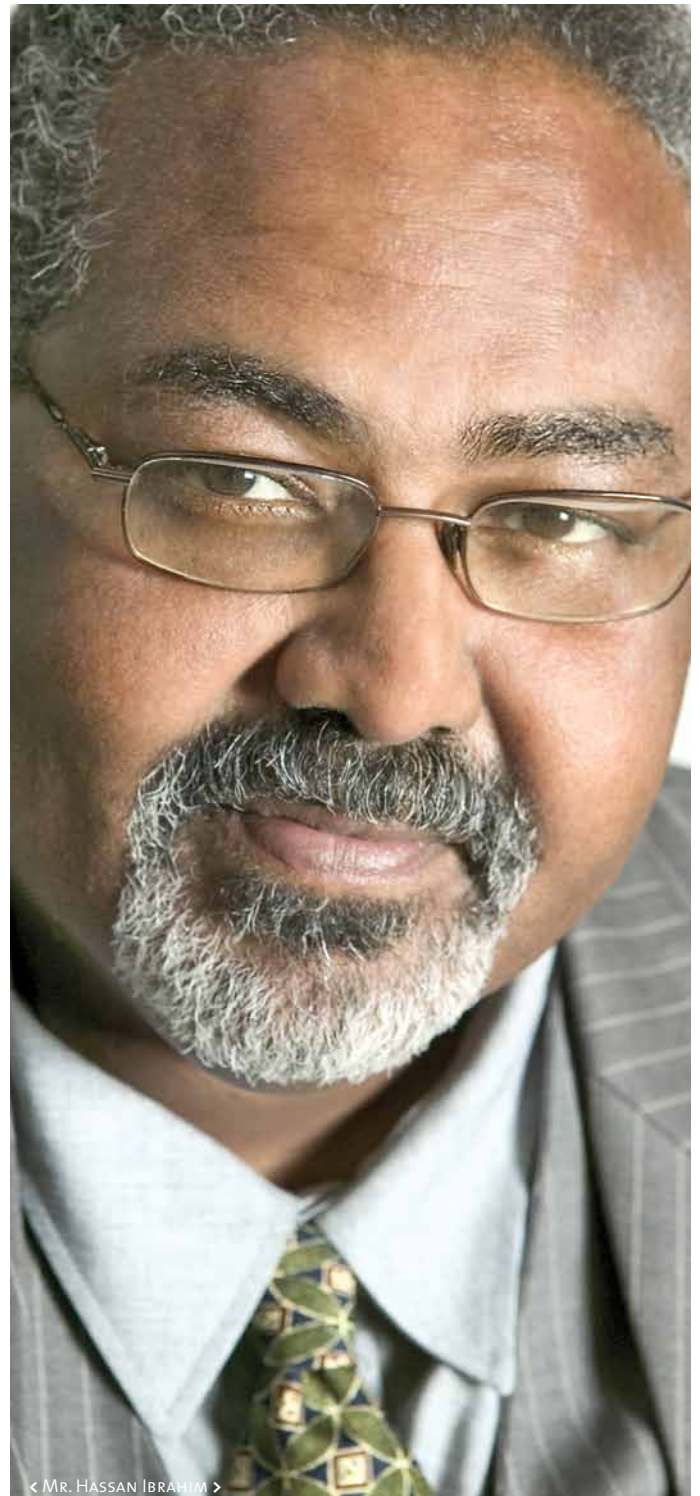
Al Jazeera perfected a concept long dreamt by TV Journalists, which is to enable the viewer to see exactly what the camera lens is recording, with as little interference as possible. We will shock our viewer but we will never conceal the reality on the ground. A diverse and wide network of reporters allowed us to break away from the strong grip of the wire services.

Until relatively recently, communication in the Middle East was very limited. It was, and still is in some places, largely restrained by political and social pressure. But things are changing in the region, and Qatar is probably the best example of that growth. Al Jazeera has definitely put Qatar on the global communications map. What do you think it means for the country and the region to have such a wide-ranging news station?

First I would like to correct a common misconception: everywhere in the world, including the so called democratic countries have dealt with controls and bias. After all, "He who writes the cheques controls the media." Western media's coverage of the Israeli bloody incursion into Gaza was shameful; it was as if there was no war at all. Al Jazeera covered the war as it was taking place and that shocked the world. For Qatar to sponsor and host such a daring TV Channel is a source of pride and impetus for further openness and transparency.

Many of our readers will remember you from the 2004 film Control Room, which documented Al Jazeera's media involvement in the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. Amongst other topics, the film addressed the subject of perspective, particularly the reservations that some individuals and governments had with Al Jazeera's attempts to cover both sides of every conflict. Does Al Jazeera still combat infamy and controversy? Is the station more widely well-received now than it was in the past? If so, what has made it that way?

Many governments in the Middle East, and even in some western countries, fall short of our expectations. They don't like us because we present both sides of the argument; and that embarrasses these governments with their citizens. While some call us the



< MR. HASSAN IBRAHIM >

mouth piece of a plethora of radical organisations from Al Qaeda to Hamas and Hezbollah; others call us the mouth piece of Zionism and American Imperialism! When you make everybody angry, then you know you're doing something right!

What is next for you and for Al Jazeera? Can you tell us about any forthcoming exciting developments? How can the station possibly grow any greater?

Al Jazeera is always growing and will always be eager to reach greater heights.