

*Massive manipulation*

# The threat to al-Jazeera



By George Galloway

*It would be a disaster for the Middle East if the US neutered the region's most independent TV station*

**S**INCE its launch just over a decade ago, the al-Jazeera satellite TV station has transformed the politics of the Middle East. For the first time, people in the region had access to a genuinely free and independent source of news and comment that was neither under the control of dictatorial regimes nor western states or corporations. Under its slogan of "The opinion ... and the other opinion", al-Jazeera gave an Arab world hungry for information and debate the means to talk to itself and shape its future. It spawned imitators across the region and has launched an English language station that is beginning to challenge the western monopoly of international news as a "voice of the global south". And the station also put Qatar, which sponsors it, on the political map and gave it unprecedented prestige throughout the Arab world and beyond.

But now that achievement is being put at risk. The evidence is clear that the US government is using its influence in Qatar to try to neuter the station's independence, bring it to heel and shift its coverage in a pro-western direction. If it

succeeds, it would be a disaster for the Arab world and its chance to shape an independent and democratic future.

When al-Jazeera was launched in 1996, it was hailed by the US as a brave step towards liberalisation of the Middle Eastern media. But that all changed after September 2001 and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The US administration could not tolerate a TV station that was popular and trusted in the Arab and Muslim world broadcasting about the reality of western and Israeli policies on the ground - and giving

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airtime to their enemies. Although US and Israeli viewpoints have always been given plenty of airtime, the freedom enjoyed by al-Jazeera's editorial staff has clearly been too liberal and democratic for the world's "leading democracy". Meanwhile, dictatorial regimes in the region pressed Washington to do something about this "turbulent priest" they believed was stirring their peoples against their despotic rule.

Initially, al-Jazeera had forced other channels in the Arab world to open up their coverage. But the new freedoms were not tolerated for long. And although the US government launched its own Arabic news channel al-Hurra, and Saudi Arabia al-Arabiya, neither succeeded in denting al-Jazeera's popularity.

But the station has had to pay a high price for its independence and professionalism. Its offices in Kabul and Baghdad were bombed by the US; its Baghdad correspondent Tariq Ayyub was killed; its Kabul correspondent Taysir Alluni was arrested in Spain and charged with terrorism; and its cameraman Sami Alhaji was kidnapped in Kabul and continues to be held in Guantánamo Bay. Most notoriously of all, George Bush even suggested to Tony Blair that they bomb al-Jazeera's Doha headquarters.

Now the US, which maintains a large military base in Qatar, has adopted a more subtle approach to breaking the Arabs' voice of independence and diversity. And the signs are that some elements in the Qatari government have yielded to the relentless US pressure. As one source close to al-Jazeera has put it: "You don't need to bomb a TV station to change its direction." A recent reshuffle has brought outspokenly pro-US directors on to the board, including a former Qatari ambassador to Washington. Another has boasted publicly that the tone and content of al-Jazeera's coverage is going to be changed. But these moves have already backfired and caused huge controversy not only in Qatar but throughout the Middle East, and there is every chance that what is in effect an attempted coup at the station will be reversed. It would be a huge loss for independence and freedom in the Arab world if it succeeded.

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