

## The rise and decline of London as a pan-Arab media hub

By Najm Jarrah

**January, 2008.** Slowly but surely over the past few years, London has been losing its status as unchallenged capital of the pan-Arab media.

Some important players on the London Arab media scene have moved out, either wholly or in part. Those that remain are being eclipsed by newer outlets based in the region, or challenged by changing media production and consumption patterns in the Arab world. Others have waned, or wound up completely. The factors that combined to turn the British capital into a magnet for the Arab media – money, technology, expertise and political conditions – are nowadays having something of a reverse effect. There is still an enormous amount of Arab media activity around. But while London was central to the emergence of a pan-Arab daily press and the proliferation of transnational Arabic publications from the late 1970s to the 1990s, it is a relatively modest participant in the pan-Arab media's current satellite TV-led and entertainment-oriented booms.

So, what has changed over the years? Not much about Britain as host, but plenty about the Arab media and the environment in which they operate. London's stint as their hub can be seen as having marked a transition between two stages in the development of the pan-Arab media: the Lebanese phase, when the Beirut press and publishing industry acted as a kind of pan-Arab media by proxy, and the al-Jazeera era with concomitant relaxation of media controls in many Arab countries.

With nowhere else in the Arab world enjoying comparable press and personal freedoms to Lebanon's, Europe became the destination of choice for publications and journalists who abandoned Beirut after the outbreak of civil war in 1975 - and continued

doing so in waves as the troubles persisted, notably after the 1982 Israeli invasion. As formerly Lebanese-based publishers re-launched abroad or started new titles and ventures, they initiated a trend that quickly developed into a growth industry, with a succession of Arab governments, individuals, political groups and other interested parties getting in on the act.

Thus, more than a century after the first Syrian and Egyptian exiles took to publishing Arabic journals in European cities to escape censorship at home, the phenomenon of the modern Arab offshore media was born: produced by Arabs, for Arabs, in Arabic, with Arab agendas and attitudes, but outside the stifling confines of the Arab states.

For some of these media emigrants, Lebanese especially, Paris was initially the favored choice of haven. Others found nearby (and cheaper) Cyprus more convenient. But the bigger and more ambitious ventures gravitated increasingly to London, in turn attracting others, and the British capital became *the* place from which to address the Arab world as a whole, or at least its newspaper- and magazine-reading elites.

### **The lure of London**

In its heyday, London was home to scores of Arabic publications of diverse provenance, function and quality: From lavishly-subsidized journals with pretensions to a worldwide readership, political publications of every persuasion and cheaply-printed dissident tracts, to glossy lifestyle magazines, sophisticated cultural titles and mischievous (or merely mercenary) gossip-purveyors.

In the forefront were the pan-Arab daily newspapers, which were first conceived in London and proceeded to flourish: Saudi Arabia's *Asharq al-Awsat*, the pro-Libyan *al-Arab*, the Palestinian Arab nationalist voice *al-Quds al-Arabi*, and then the renascent (and subsequently Saudi-acquired) Lebanese *al-Hayat*. A number of others attempted to launch over the years but proved unviable or short-lived. The list was joined by

established dailies from Arab countries which began publishing international editions in London: both state-owned (Egypt's *al-Ahram* and the Iraqi ruling party daily *ath-Thawra*) and private (such as Kuwait's *al-Qabas* – a move that proved invaluable to the Kuwaiti government after the August 1990 Iraqi invasion, furnishing it with a ready-made platform in exile). More recently came *az-Zaman*, the Saudi-funded Iraqi paper that was shortly to become the nucleus of Iraq's first post-Saddam media empire. And with the advent of the internet, the self-styled first Arabic online daily paper, *Elaph*, was established in London by a Saudi outfit with extensive media interests in the Arab world.

Why London? As a global hub with longstanding and multi-faceted links to the Arab world, the infrastructure, facilities and expertise it had to offer were hard to match. London was unparalleled as an information, communications and news center in pre-internet days. It was easy to access and distribute from, and imposed fewer legal, bureaucratic or visa obstacles than other places. And in addition to its diplomatic and business importance to the Arab world, it was home to a vast and varied Arab community – whether transient or settled – that provided the incoming and emergent Arab media ventures with a ready pool of both employees and readers.

Yet it was the Arab world itself, rather than Arab expatriates, that the majority of these offshore publications saw as their principal audience. The theory was that publishing out of London provided them with both editorial freedom and a qualitative edge. They would send their products to Arab markets: they might be excluded from some if they ruffled official feathers, but unlike their home-based counterparts they couldn't be muzzled outright, censored or coerced into toeing official lines.

The practice proved to be somewhat different, not least because Arab officialdom itself quickly became the main bankroller of the phenomenon. It was the quest for political influence rather than commercial profit that was the principal driving force behind the expansion of the offshore Arab media. Discretely or overtly, directly (through subsidies and payoffs) or indirectly (via advertising or bulk subscriptions), in person or via proxies, Arab regimes and political groups, and even rival factions within them, took

to sponsoring London-based outlets to promote their interests. This became the norm rather than the exception. The influence of Arab regimes was, to varying degrees, readily discernible in the content of most of London's significant Arabic publications: whether acting as overt mouthpieces, endorsing their policies, embellishing their images, overlooking their faults, countering their critics, discrediting their detractors or merely observing their "red lines." Indeed, gaining access to political patronage seemed to be the very *raison d'être* of some. For the more reputable, where co-option and inducements did not work, sticks were available in the form of denial of access to markets or advertising and other kinds of pressure. Even those outlets that strove for a greater degree of independence and professionalism found themselves having to self-censor if they wanted to be distributable in the Arab homeland, or compromise in other ways to ensure financial survival.

Nevertheless, despite all the constraints on content and limitations of access, London and the other offshore media centers provided the Arab world and diaspora with a diversity of information, perspectives and platforms that it sorely lacked during what have been termed the "dismal years" of the home-based Arab media.

Part of the reason for the Arab media focus on London was its traditional status as a haven for Arab political exiles and dissidents (another role it partly inherited from Beirut). Opposition publications in the broad sense, whether speaking for specific movements or reflecting dissenting currents in one part of the Arab world or other, have long constituted a significant proportion of the London Arab media. The vast majority have been transient and of minimal circulation, but the more effective have attracted both welcome and unwelcome attention back home and in the wider world. The Saudi authorities insisted on the closure of the opposition monthly *al-Jazeera al-Arabiya*, which had become a unique source of news from within the kingdom, as part of their rapprochement with the Shiite opposition in the early 1990s. More recently, Riyadh strove hard to put an end to attempts by London-based dissidents to agitate against it via fax, SMS and satellite TV. The emergence of London as a mainstream Arab media hub clearly enhanced its importance as a focus of offshore opposition activity too. The

Bahraini opposition waged an effective media campaign out of London in the 1990s. And with the mushrooming of new Iraqi opposition groups after the 1991 Gulf war and the resurgence of old ones, it was largely via London outlets that they publicly conducted their debates and played out their rivalries.

### **Gulf crisis & satellite revolution**

The 1990-91 Gulf crisis and war proved to be a pivotal event for the London Arab media in several respects. An immediate consequence was the abrupt curtailment of the embargoed Iraqi regime's ability to support sympathetic offshore publications or journalists. The speed with which some of its London-based clients went out of business, or simply swapped sides, was remarkable. Yet this did little to lessen the ferocity of the ensuing propaganda battle. As the crisis unfolded over the course of seven months, the acute political polarization it caused in the Arab world fuelled a vicious war of words between the rival camps and their respective media. The mutual mud-slinging broke all the established taboos about the public airing of inter-Arab disputes, and spurred frantic efforts by the main Arab players to prevail in the public debate. In particular, Saudi Arabia acted to further tighten and extend its already formidable influence over and control of the pan-Arab media. In London, journalists whose loyalties were considered suspect were purged from some publications, and the Saudis embarked on an aggressive (and ongoing) campaign of Arab media acquisitions, starting with the full buyout of *al-Hayat*.

But the most enduring legacy of the conflict for the Arab media lay elsewhere: in the way the so-called "CNN war" alerted the Arab world to the potential of satellite television.

Given its existing concentration of Arab media output and expertise, it seemed only natural for London to be selected as the launch-pad for the first serious Arab forays into satellite news broadcasting. Both were Saudi-sponsored: the pioneering MBC channel, and BBC Arabic television, a venture that soon collapsed after rows over

editorial independence, but ended up famously providing al-Jazeera with its core founding staff.

Yet the subsequent explosive growth of Arab satellite TV largely passed London by. A handful of minor channels set up headquarters in London, but the vast majority that have emerged over the past decade are located elsewhere, including all the big players. This may be offset by the impending re-launch of a reincarnated BBC Arabic TV news service – though the jury is out on how much impact it is likely to have given the intensity of the competition and the circumstances of the channel's formation. In the meantime, MBC has moved out from London to Dubai, citing the need to cut costs and the advantages of being physically closer to its audience.

If London's high living and operating costs – coupled with the vastly improved availability within the Arab world of modern media technology, skills and infrastructure – are deterring new Arab media investment and even driving some out, they have also been squeezing the established, largely print-based, London Arab media. Some have restructured, downsized, diversified or relocated, and several no longer exist. Numbers are hard to ascertain, but there have been plenty of anecdotal accounts of Arab-funded London media outlets struggling, or folding completely, as sponsors cut back on support. It is debatable how much of this is due to the lure – to investors and audiences alike – of satellite TV. Available circulation figures do not suggest that the main London Arabic newspapers have been adversely affected by it, and indeed they can argue that their readership has grown exponentially in recent years via the internet.

But satellite TV is not the only challenge they face. The emergence in recent years of relatively high quality and independent newspapers in several Arab countries – itself arguably a by-product of the satellite revolution – has reduced the distinctiveness of the London press. It has been further eroded by the pressures on the London-based media to observe similar editorial constraints to those imposed on their local counterparts, if only to ensure access to markets. For the most part they simply do not or cannot make use

of the freedom available to them, which was supposed to be their big advantage and London's major attraction in the first place.

### **Adapting to change**

So has London really begun to outlive its usefulness as a base in the new Arab media climate? The recent experience of some of the big operators suggests it might, up to a point.

*Asharq al-Awsat* recently cut its staff, and its entire stable of weekly sister-magazines was moved to the Gulf. It has also established a separate edition for the Saudi market, which accounts for much of its circulation and advertising income. Despite this, the London-based main edition has become increasingly Saudized over the years, whether in terms of content, staff, news agenda or political line. Its op-ed pages, once comparatively diverse, carry less off-message material these days (Fahmi Howeidi's longstanding weekly column being a notable discordant exception). The paper has no plans to leave London. It is even reportedly thinking of setting up a television channel, although it remains to be seen how viable that may be. While *Asharq al-Awsat* has developed steadily in size (constantly adding supplements and feature sections) and reach (it was quick to start distributing in post-war Iraq, for example), the qualitative edge it enjoyed when it was started in the late 1970s is a thing of the past. "We're not that different to the papers in Saudi Arabia in what we say," laments one staffer. "There's no real reason why we should be based in London at all. It's mostly a matter of prestige."

*Al-Hayat* has also undergone changes. The paper made good use of the advantages bestowed by a London location when it re-launched there in 1987, ten years after closing in Beirut. It was qualitatively a cut above any other Arab daily. It provided original worldwide reporting from an Arab perspective through a network of capable correspondents, while most of the competition relied principally on recycled agency material. And it was independent enough to be subjected to frequent distribution bans in various Arab countries in its early years. Its opinion pages were rich, and contributing

writers included some of the Arab world's leading public intellectuals. *Al-Hayat* was also a pioneer in the use of modern technology, becoming the first Arab paper to be produced electronically and the first to establish remote printing centers, before satellite technology made that the norm.

Today's *al-Hayat* is not so distinctive. It still has strengths. But like *Asharq al-Awsat*, albeit to a lesser extent, Saudi influence has become more visible. Longstanding readers complain of a more conformist editorial approach and a general erosion of quality. The London base has ceased to be the asset it was. In 2000 the paper moved the bulk of its editorial operations and administration to Beirut, keeping only the political section and senior editorial and management staff in the UK. At the same time, it greatly expanded its presence in Saudi Arabia, establishing a Saudi edition and farming out some of its functions (such as sports pages) to its Saudi bureau. While growing in the Arab world, *al-Hayat*'s London presence has been shrinking. Its weekly sister newsmagazine, *al-Wasat*, struggled to make much impact, and was eventually demoted to a weekly supplement of the main paper and then wound up. *Al-Hayat*'s ambitious plans to establish a news partnership with Lebanon's LBC television that would operate jointly out of London and Beirut proved expensive and cumbersome and had to be scaled down, and the on-site London studios set up for the purpose were closed after only 18 months. When *al-Hayat*'s publishers launched a weekly women's magazine, they did so from Lebanon.

At the other end of the political spectrum, *al-Quds al-Arabi* is probably the only one of the major London dailies that really needs its offshore base. As the pan-Arab print media's anti-establishment standard-bearer, it is reviled by detractors as demagogic and revered by fans for its courage and candor in criticizing Arab regimes and reporting unflattering news about them. As a result it has always been excluded from some Arab countries, faces frequent temporary bans in others, and is starved of commercial advertising. But being the *bête noir* of so many governments also provides the paper with a market niche: it can carry news and commentary of a kind that its competitors wouldn't touch (although for all its outspokenness, it does appear to pull punches when reporting on the Arab countries to which it does have access). Staffers argue that the paper's true



reach is far greater than its actual circulation figures, and that its website is particularly popular in places where it's banned. As for surviving in London, *al-Quds al-Arabi* is perennially cash-strapped, but is a considerably more modest operation than its Saudi-owned or -funded rivals.

While it evidently makes good financial and practical sense for many of the Arab media outfits that set up in London to move back "home," the alternative bases on offer there to both existing and new ventures are not without their problems. Beirut has gone some way towards rehabilitating its role as a media center, but Lebanon's political instability is bound to inhibit that process, at least for the immediate future. And although Dubai has boomed spectacularly as the new regional media hub, its recent muzzling of the Pakistani Geo Television channel raises questions about the potential constraints on the freedom of any pan-Arab outlet that establishes itself there. This may not be a pressing practical concern for most. For the politically controversial and independent of state patronage, however, official attitudes to the media will have to change markedly within the Arab world before they can do entirely without a base beyond its borders.

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