

# Al-Jazeera bureau forced to stop broadcasting Maghreb news programme

Moroccan authorities have decided to stop the pan-Arab satellite TV news station Al-Jazeera from broadcasting a daily news programme covering the Maghreb countries (Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) from its studios in the Moroccan capital Rabat.

On 6 May, Al-Jazeera's Rabat bureau received a fax from the National Agency for Telecom Regulation (ANRT) saying the frequency it used for broadcasting the Maghreb programme was being withdrawn because of "technical and legal problems."

The Qatar-based TV station began producing its daily Maghreb news programme on 17 November 2006. It already had a bureau in Rabat and was obliged to comply with Moroccan regulations.

"We submitted a complete dossier to the government's High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA), including our business registration, our licence, our terms of reference and the station's charter," bureau chief Hassan Rachidi told Reporters Without Borders (RSF). "But the application was frozen and we began working on the basis of provisional permits renewable ever three months. All our equipment was approved by the ANRT." The current permit is good until 13 June.

"We created a new space for news reporting where none existed before," Rachidi added. "Thanks to this daily news programme, the public in the Maghreb began taking an interest in what is going on in neighbouring countries."

Al-Jazeera has done many stories on Morocco, including the issue of Western Sahara. On 3 May, it referred to close relations which the late King Hassan had with the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad. But there is no evidence that this decision was linked to any of these stories.

The station has been the target of a great deal of harassment in both the Maghreb and the Middle East, ranging from bureaucratic obstructiveness to the arrest of several of its correspondents. In Morocco, Al-Jazeera was able to open a regional bureau and cover the country's parliamentary elections of September 2007 in detail.

"The attitude of the Moroccan authorities is incomprehensible," said RSF. "Al-Jazeera has been broadcasting its special programme on the Maghreb for the past year and a half without any difficulty. The suddenness of this measure and the lack of a valid reason suggest that it was a political decision."

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