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by Adam Sharon

As the opening salvos of the Six Day War rang out, Arab audiences were buoyed by the assurances of Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser promising victory.

Radio announcers from Cairo and other Arab capitals furthered the fallacy, speaking of Israel's imminent demise. They described Arab troops marching toward Tel Aviv. As the lies gave way to a truth the Arab world could not fathom, a collective gasp ensued. Entire nations pumped up on Pan-Arab rhetoric were deceived as the disaster of 1948 was compounded by the 1967 war.

The Six Day War left an indelible mark on the political landscape of the Middle East, but it also left a scar on the ability of the populace to trust its media. Veracity and honesty were sacrificed for deception and skullduggery.

The Arab satellite channel Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar, is aiming to right those wrongs. Author Hugh Miles, a journalist and Middle East consultant, explains the channel's phenomenon in *Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West*. Miles's curiosity about Al-Jazeera was piqued during the Iraq War. As a London-based freelancer for Sky News, his job was to monitor the competition's war coverage, including that of Al-Jazeera.

After writing an article for the *London Review of Books* about the subject, Miles was left with more questions than answers: "Who had started the channel? Why now? How was it financed? What exactly was the channel's relationship with Osama bin Laden? Was satellite television news actually moving Arab countries toward real democracy?"

Miles set out to answer these questions in this exposé, but instead stumbled upon a bigger story. Al-Jazeera, he writes, "has been so inextricably linked to tumultuous recent events in the Middle East... that the story of this news network is, in fact, the story of the upheavals that have taken place in that troubled region in recent years."

On November 1, 1996 the channel launched, and controversy immediately ensued. Israelis speaking Hebrew were invited onto Al-Jazeera. *The Opposite Direction*, a program pitting guests with polar opposite viewpoints argued their differences on air.

The result was a ratings bonanza that made for great entertainment.

Callers were invited to opine live on these programs. Political debate was unleashed and the spigot could not be turned off. Arab leaders were attacked for authoritarian rule and labeled lackeys of the United States. The program's host, Dr. Faisal al-Qasim, was called "secular, a communist, a Freemason, a Zionist and an Arab nationalist all at the same time."

IT IS this duality that the author constantly refers to as proof that Al-Jazeera is a reliable news organization. Al-Jazeera was simultaneously panned by Ariel Sharon as pro-Palestinian, and by the late Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat as pro-Zionist. Arab governments harangue the Qatari emir to shut down the network, and its bureaus in Ramallah and Amman were temporarily closed, while senior US government officials called the network biased and a mouthpiece for Saddam Hussein. Osama bin Laden's speeches are aired on Al-Jazeera, yet Islamists deride the channel as secularist.

Is this ability to be an equal opportunity irritant the measure of a news organization's credibility? Do the reactions of a wide range of regional actors certify Al-Jazeera's honesty in reporting? Miles answers these questions in the affirmative, and this line of thinking serves as the crutch upon which his point of view rests.

Putting the credibility issue aside, Al-Jazeera has awakened the Arab world from a deep slumber. The second Palestinian intifada proved a seminal moment in the network's history. Al-Jazeera's coverage galvanized the Arab world. "As the Arab public followed the events of the intifada hour by hour, Al-Jazeera became a household name across the Arab world, although it remained still largely unknown in the West," the author writes.

Jordanian TV, in contrast, ran "its usual fluffy program schedule... interspersed with dreary staged monologues by government spokesmen."

Al-Jazeera again became an actor in international politics after the September 11 attacks. The news channel received and aired exclusive footage of Osama bin Laden. Charges were made that Al-Jazeera was in cahoots with America's enemy, a claim that was made again during the Iraq War, when the channel captured and aired exclusive footage of two dead British soldiers and five captured American soldiers.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and British Prime Minister Tony Blair accused Al-Jazeera of violating the Geneva Conventions. Al-Jazeera's logo, burned onto the bottom right of its war footage, nonetheless aired on television networks worldwide.

Though Miles's reporting is informative and the Al-Jazeera effect upon the Arab world is well argued, the author is too cavalier about advocating on behalf of the network rather than letting the facts alone make his case. Objectivity is somewhat sacrificed and supplanted with cheerleading and occasional flimsy reporting.

Consider the following example when then-US secretary of state Colin Powell met with the Qatari emir and requested that Al-Jazeera's rhetoric be toned down. Writes Miles: "When the Kabul bureau was blown up a few weeks later, it was only logical to assume that was a connection between Powell's quiet word and the attack." That charge, printed without corroboration or supporting evidence, borders on the irresponsible, and in newspaper terminology, necessitates a retraction.

Al-Jazeera is no longer a phenomenon: It is an institution. If the first Gulf War of 1990-91 was CNN's defining moment, this period of Middle East history has proven to be Al-Jazeera's. With its increased legitimacy, what the future will bring for this upstart news channel remains unknown.

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