

**Scotland on Sunday | The eye of the storm****Al-Jazeera**

THROUGHOUT his study of the Al-Jazeera television network, Hugh Miles adopts an old journalistic rule of thumb which has some merit: if everyone is complaining about you, you must be doing something right.

Al-Jazeera has been attacked by western governments, particularly those in London and Washington, for allegedly acting as a mouthpiece for al-Qaeda and for stoking - rather than simply reporting - the insurgency in Iraq. In the Middle East it has, according to Miles, been the victim of an advertising boycott organised by Saudi Arabia which has made it impossible for the station to cover its costs.

Among sections of the Arab public it is considered either a propaganda outlet for its financial backer, the Emir of Qatar - in whose territory the station is based, and from where the US launched the invasion of Iraq - or, worse, as a sinister plot by Mossad, the Israeli secret service, and the CIA. Normally it would be easy to dismiss such allegations, but Al-Jazeera is not a normal TV network. Its decision, for the first time in the Arab world, to allow Israeli government officials to appear and explain their views in Hebrew, looks admirably iconoclastic. But there are claims the station was infiltrated by agents of Saddam Hussein, and one of its most prominent correspondents is to go on trial in Spain accused of being an al-Qaeda mole.

More broadly, the story of Al-Jazeera raises profound and disturbing questions about how freedom and democracy might look in parts of the world whose populations may well have different ideas on those subjects from westerners. It is this last point which allows Miles to claim: "Al-Jazeera has been so inextricably linked to tumultuous recent events in the Middle East - indeed at times it has been at the very eye of the storm - 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."

In this excellent book Miles delivers on that claim. It is much more than a study of a TV station.

Much of the explosive impact of Al-Jazeera is explained simply by the prevalence of authoritarian regimes across North Africa and the Middle East. In many of these countries, truth bifurcates into an official version of what the facts ought to be, and wild conspiracy theories on 'the Arab street'. Of course, people in these countries can watch western satellite TV; but Al-Jazeera is home grown, and that fact alone immediately gave it immense credibility when it was launched in 1996.

When the station cut its teeth reporting the second intifada, the Israeli military was discomfited by pictures of its activities beamed live across the Arab world. But later, when there were rumours of a massacre by Israeli troops in Jenin, it was Al-Jazeera's Walid Al-Omary who quashed them by reporting that there were tens, not hundreds, of casualties. By and large, elected Israeli governments have decided the best way of dealing with Al-Jazeera is to appear on it as often as possible.

The attitude of unelected Arab regimes has often been less beneficent. Miles gives the impression that many of them would dearly love to block the Al-Jazeera signal, if blocking satellite broadcasting were not so difficult. At one point, the Algerian government shut off the electricity supply to Algiers to stop its population watching an Al-Jazeera programme.

Other governments have prevented the network opening a bureau in their countries, or have closed existing ones. Even the elected and relatively democratic Palestinian Authority briefly banned Al-Jazeera - its crime was to investigate corruption.

THE RELATIONSHIP between the US government and Al-Jazeera is both troubled and troubling. Many leading officials have been interviewed on the channel. But the offices in both Kabul and Baghdad were attacked by American aircraft. The administration's explanations for the attacks are not convincing; and the US has repeatedly appealed to the Emir of Qatar to 'do something' about Al-Jazeera, raising suspicions that it has one attitude to media freedom in the West and another in the Middle East. When, after September 11, 2001 the network began broadcasting messages from the al-Qaeda leadership, western governments lined up to denounce the network as the "Osama bin Laden Broadcasting Corporation", while western TV networks lined up to buy Al-Jazeera's pictures.

Miles gives a balanced account of these controversies. But if there is a fault in his book, it is that sometimes he does not press hard enough. This is particularly true of a strange incident in late 2001, when Al-Jazeera and CNN were asked to submit lists of questions to Bin Laden, on the understanding that both channels would air the results.

Al-Jazeera initially denied that any interview took place, but its correspondent Taysir Alluni did meet Bin Laden - and although the station refused to air the interview, it surfaced by a mysterious route on CNN. The CNN view was that at that point, Bin Laden reading out the contents of the Kabul telephone directory would have been newsworthy. In fact he appeared to confirm responsibility for the attack on the World Trade Center.

Al-Jazeera was accused of suppressing the interview because it did not want al-Qaeda's role to become public - an accusation which, on the face of it, seems silly. The explanation offered to Miles by Jihad Ballout, Al-Jazeera's manager of media relations, that the interview was conducted under duress - "Bin Laden was using Al-Jazeera to give out a very edited and sanitised statement to his people. It was a message, a pure message" - seems equally daft. Al-Jazeera had shown no such qualms on previous occasions, and Ballout's argument concedes ground to critics who say none of the Bin Laden tapes should have been broadcast.

This episode takes on a looming significance because of the personnel involved. In September 2003, Taysir Alluni was arrested on the orders of a Spanish judge, accused of membership of al-Qaeda. As usual, Miles provides a commendably even-handed account of the affair, but there is little doubt that a conviction would be a blow to the station.

Given that Al-Jazeera was such a radically new venture, it would be astonishing if there were not accusations of bias against it, and indeed instances of bias on the network. But it is difficult to disagree with the New York Times, in a leader written after a particularly absurd attempt to ban Al-Jazeera reporters from the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, that "if our hope for

the Arab world is, as the Bush administration never ceases to remind us, for it to enjoy a free, democratic life, Al-Jazeera is the kind of television station we should encourage".

If the network survives, that is. Thus far, Al-Jazeera has stayed on the air thanks to the goodwill of the Emir of Qatar, but as Miles stresses, an Emir with liberal ideas is not the same thing as a functioning democracy. What the Emir gives, the Emir can take away.

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