

AL-JAZEERA: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE ARAB NEWS CHANNEL THAT IS CHALLENGING THE WEST

Many Americans find Al Jazeera loathsome, and it's not hard to see why. The news network's connections to al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, its ample coverage of terrorists and terrorist acts and its portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are all ample fodder for anti-American sentiment. Its talk shows are cauldrons of anti-Western vitriole. Even its reporters can seem complicit. They call Palestinian suicide bombers "martyrs." They append "so-called" before the phrase "war on terror." They referred to Hussein as "president," not the dictator he was, and they call Iraqi insurgents "the resistance" and coalition troops "invasion forces."

For the British journalist Hugh Miles, to admit all this is not to say Al Jazeera is irredeemable. Or, more broadly, it's not to say Al Jazeera isn't an opening for liberalism in the Middle East the way some sanguine Western observers, including Mr. Miles, hope it is.

In "Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That is Challenging the West," Mr. Miles makes the case that Al Jazeera is a first seed in the flowering of an independent media in the Muslim world, and maybe even the harbinger of a broader political opening there. It's a necessarily flawed case, of course, and in many respects it is sorely lacking even in Mr. Miles's expert hands. The story of Al Jazeera's rise contains as much or more to dishearten democrats and liberals as it does to uplift them. No amount of charitable interpretation can change that.

Still, Mr. Miles has done his homework, and this fluent Arabic-speaker and contributor to the London Review of Books educated in Libya, Eton and Oxford has written the most comprehensive study of Al Jazeera available in the English language, and probably anywhere.

Perhaps most valuably, in the course of his research Mr. Miles won over the network's senior management and landed extensive interviews with its staff. He achieves the rare feat of producing an analytically valuable, fact-intensive study of a little-known but important subject about which his opinions and speculative views are controversial and may turn out to be utterly wrong.

Few Westerners realize it, but as Mr. Miles takes pains to demonstrate, Al Jazeera's strange provenance has mattered hugely in the network's development, and may be suggestive of some broader near-term future for political trends in the Middle East if democracy fails to take root the way Westerners hope it will.

Al Jazeera is to this day government-sponsored in its headquarter nation of Qatar and, despite vigorous protests to the contrary by its executives, clearly falls short of world-class government-financed news agencies like the BBC in its independence from state authority.

But it's leagues better and more independent than other popular channels in the Middle East like Hezbollah's Al-Manar, which openly encourages suicide bombers and raises funds for them. And unlike the floundering U.S.-backed channel Al-Hurra, headquartered in Springfield, Va., it actually has a viewership.

Mr. Miles shows that it reached this unique position through a combination of luck, perseverance, risk-taking and, perhaps most unusually, the beneficence of Qatar's enlightened despot, Emir Sheikh

Hamad al-Thani, who in theory could pull the plug on the network at any moment.

The satellite-transmitted Al Jazeera (the name translates to "the Peninsula") sprang from Sheikh al-Thani's mind in the mid-1990s to replace the state information ministry he rightly viewed as antiquated and anti-modern. Mr. Al-Thani took power in 1995 at age 44 by coup, ousting his own father. After privatizing sluggish government enterprises and granting women limited civil rights, he commissioned Al Jazeera's first broadcast on November 1, 1996 with a \$137 million startup grant. He funds the network even today; it doesn't cover its own costs despite a viewership of about 40 million worldwide.

Al Jazeera's early viewers gravitated to its talk shows, Mr. Miles demonstrates, which remain its most popular features in the Arab world. The *Opposite Direction*, modeled after CNN's *Crossfire*, features two guests with diametrically opposed viewpoints, often an exiled Arab dissident and a government representative. Its guests lock horns on serious subjects while the host lets sparks fly. It is "without question the most popular show of its kind in the history of Arab television," Mr. Miles reports.

Westerners know Al Jazeera primarily for its news coverage, however, and it was these that made it famous worldwide. The network's greatest scoops, the Osama bin Laden tapes and its Iraq and Afghanistan coverage, have also been the source of its greatest criticism from the West.

In the minds of Al Jazeera executives, Western complaints about its coverage sounded uncannily like criticism from the Arab world. Mr. Miles treads mostly toward an agnostic relativism on this question, apparently believing that Donald Rumsfeld's critique of Al Jazeera is the moral equivalent of Saudi Arabia's or Libya's. "You have to present both points of view," Al Jazeera London bureau chief Mostefa Souag tells Mr. Miles, a sentiment the author quotes approvingly through his study.

But that notion is belied by the evidence. Mr. Miles is to be credited for detailing in full the strange links between Al Jazeera and the Saddam Hussein regime and al Qaeda, links which undercut parts of his thesis and help show doubters why Mr. Rumsfeld's complaints have more merit than Hezbollah's or Muammar Qadhafi's.

For one, Saddam's intelligence agents appeared to have penetrated Al Jazeera thoroughly before the government's fall, casting considerable doubt on the channel's objectivity. In 2003, documents obtained by the Times of London surfaced indicating that Al Jazeera's general director, Mohammed Jasem al-Ali, kept relations with Saddam's Mukhabarat intelligence service, and that at least two Al Jazeera employees had been paid off by the Hussein regime.

What was more, Al Jazeera employees had apparently helped pass notes from Osama bin Laden en route to Saddam Hussein. Al-Ali was fired after the news broke, although the network denied the firing was related to those explosive revelations. The network still maintains an undisclosed relationship with al Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden. Westerners still don't know the extent of that relationship, and Al Jazeera guards it tightly.

As if connections to terrorists and a dictator's intelligence thugs weren't enough, there are deeper reasons why Mr. Rumsfeld's complaint had merit. As Mr. Miles admits, the advent of a freer press has had some negative consequences in the Middle East. "It is probably true that Al-Jazeera propagates hate,"

writes Mr. Miles. He thinks its reporting helps explain why the Arab response to the second intifada was so much stronger than the first, and thinks it "probably made peace and reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis more elusive."

Incredibly, in his conclusion, Mr. Miles still writes that "Al-Jazeera is probably less biased than any of the mainstream American news networks." He says this despite admitting that "in Afghanistan, the Taliban were often presented as the noble underdog and America as the vengeful colonial aggressor" and that the channel "is clearly sympathetic toward the Palestinians and their political goals."

How to square that circle? Mr. Miles never does, pointing instead to "deep cultural differences between the people making the editorial choices" and observing that "like an commercial station, Al-Jazeera is pitching itself at its viewership." That's true, of course, and therein lies the rub. Al Jazeera is only as good as the populace it caters to. And as long as that populace is as illiberal and undemocratic as it presently is, Al Jazeera will be more a part of the problem than a ready solution.

Brendan Conway is an editorial writer at The Washington Times.