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A sharp focus on Al Jazeera

By Anthony Day
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"AL-JAZEERA" is an uncomfortable and indispensable book. Uncomfortable because author Hugh Miles, an Englishman with wide experience in the Arab Middle East, bluntly challenges assumptions many Americans hold about that part of the world. Indispensable for that very reason, because it gives readers a more vivid, accurate understanding of that world.

Miles achieves this by focusing on a new phenomenon that, he argues plausibly, is here to stay: A medium of mass communication that is relatively free of governmental bias reaches all Arabs and, increasingly, Muslims of every sort. The medium is the Arabic television network Al Jazeera, based in Doha, capital of the Persian Gulf state of Qatar, and it brings Arabs news they can trust for the first time. Yes, Miles says, Al Jazeera is pro-Palestinian, yes, it is anti-American, yes, it is pro-Islamic, but not in ways that are beyond the normal ties of nationality or the common bonds of religious or ethnic identity. In effect he is saying that this 9-year-old network reflects its base and constituency much as American and other Western networks reflect theirs.

That not all Al Jazeera's viewers trust the network will come as no surprise to Western news people, who have had their experiences being accused of bias. So relatively even-handed is Al Jazeera that in many Muslim quarters it sometimes is accused of being an Israeli or U.S. operation planted on Arab soil to promote anti-Arab interests.

In fact it is bankrolled, with tens of millions of dollars a year, by the emir of Qatar, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, leader of the al Thani tribe, which rules the nation of 610,000 people, two-thirds of whom are guest workers. Qatar is rich in natural gas and is closely allied with the United States, which established its Coalition Central Command base there to direct the attack on Iraq. U.S. officials have not been shy about expressing their displeasure with what they call Al Jazeera's anti-American bias.

Miles is well situated to see Al Jazeera from an angle Americans ordinarily do not get. He is scornful of American media and the American public's ignorance of international affairs. The son of a British diplomat in the Arab world, Miles has studied Arabic, lived in the Middle East and advises companies that do business there. Some of his statements are overwrought, as when he charges that "the American media rigorously self-censors for fear of being labeled unpatriotic or worse, anti-Semitic." He seems to be judging by American television, not the deep, varied and subtle coverage in U.S. newspapers.

His detailed account of the birth of Al Jazeera and its early years, though, is more nuanced than his occasional blunt statements would indicate. And Miles makes a strong case that with the emergence of Al Jazeera, a line has been crossed from which there is no going back. Even if something were to happen to the benign and modernist emir, Miles contends that the appetite for genuine news, not government propaganda, has been whetted in the Arab world for good.

He closes his book with a quotation from an Arab acquaintance: "Freedom is like death. You cannot visit death and then come back from it."

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