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And Now, the Other News

By Isabel Hilton

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In one sense the story of Al Jazeera began in 1995, when Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani overthrew his father and became the emir of Qatar, a tiny Persian Gulf state that sits on one trillion cubic feet of natural gas. As **Hugh Miles** puts it in "Al-Jazeera," his fascinating account of the world's most notorious television station, the new emir wanted Qatar to be like Switzerland, "rich, neutral and secure." A television channel was part of the plan.

The emir was helped by the failure of another experiment: in 1994 the BBC had agreed with a Saudi-financed station to supply a news service in Arabic; the partnership collapsed in 1996 over Saudi objections to the content. It left 250 BBC-trained journalists and auxiliary staff members out of a job; 120 of the newly unemployed signed on with the emir of Qatar and Al Jazeera was born.

Today Al Jazeera is the bete noire of the Bush administration. Back then, it was a beacon of light in an Arab media world that was dark indeed. The station's bold reporting and provocative talk shows outraged repressive governments across the region. The State Department Human Rights Report on Qatar in 2000 commented favorably on Al Jazeera's willingness to carry criticism of Qatar's own government.

There was a long list of offended powers: Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority; the Jordanian government, which closed the Amman bureau and recalled its ambassador from Doha; the Algerian, the Moroccan, the Kuwaiti and the Israeli governments, all separately offended. The Saudi government to this day operates a crippling advertising ban against the station; a Saudi sheik started the independent, Dubai-based satellite news channel Al Arabiya in 2003 as an alternative. Al Jazeera shocked the Arab world by putting Israelis on the air, something no Arab station had done before. In Egypt, a Jazeera correspondent was denounced as an agent of Mossad and of British interests, and by 2002 Al Jazeera had had bureaus closed in six countries and had accumulated 400 official letters of complaint. In short, Al Jazeera was a welcome force in a region where governments were accustomed to think of their press as little more than dictating machines for government propaganda. Even today, of the hundreds of channels the average Arab citizen with a \$100 satellite setup can tune in to, most are official government outlets.

The story of the troubled relationship between Al Jazeera and the Bush administration makes up much of **Hugh Miles**'s narrative. Miles is a young, Arabic-speaking British journalist, the son of a diplomat, who has spent much of his life in the Middle East. His account is both detailed and compelling, though his undisguised sympathy for Al Jazeera will doubtless annoy some readers. According to Miles, the tensions with the United States began with the war in Afghanistan when Al Jazeera, with its bureau in Kabul and its cultivated contacts with bin Laden, was well placed to monopolize coverage and to receive the exclusive bin Laden tapes.

Back in the United States, Condoleezza Rice was asking American networks to censor the Qaeda material they bought from Al Jazeera on the grounds that bin Laden's utterances might contain hidden messages. (Why any Qaeda operative wouldn't read the full text on the Internet or watch Al Jazeera was not clear.) The networks complied. But when Colin Powell asked the emir of Qatar to influence Al Jazeera to tone down its reporting, the emir declined. "Parliamentary life requires you have free and credible media," he said, "and that is what we are trying to do." The exchange played poorly for the United States in a region often criticized for its democratic failings.

As well as putting bin Laden on the air, Al Jazeera reported from the receiving end of the Afghan war: the civilian casualties, the houses and lives destroyed. Finally, as the Northern Alliance forces advanced, the Jazeera offices in Kabul were obliterated by an American 500-pound bomb. After initial denials, a Pentagon spokesman admitted that Al Jazeera had been targeted as an alleged locus of Qaeda activity. General Tommy Franks said that a bin

Laden deputy, Muhammad Atef, was among the casualties in the attack. (He was killed again a few weeks later, in a completely separate incident.)

When the war in Iraq came, Al Jazeera was again well placed: its widely distributed correspondents all spoke Arabic and the station adopted a stance of skepticism toward all sides. It is a position that is unacceptable only if you assume that one side in a war has a monopoly on truth. Miles, who spent several weeks during the invasion of Iraq watching Al Jazeera on behalf of Sky News, argues that Al Jazeera favored neither side. "Like most Arabs," he writes, "it opposed Saddam's regime and opposed the invasion."

Washington has spent millions of dollars on Madison Avenue-style public diplomacy in the Middle East, selling the United States as though, as one former American ambassador put it, "we were a brand of toothpaste." It has been a failure. The problem, Miles argues cogently, is not one of public relations but of policy. Rami Khouri, executive editor of The Daily Star of Beirut, agrees. Promoting American values, he observed, might merely highlight the gap between those values and the nation's policy in the Middle East.

Shutting the station down will do nothing to change this. Today Al Jazeera commands an audience of some 40 million and, Miles argues, has "reversed the flow of information, so that now, for the first time in hundreds of years, it passes from east to west." If in some Arab countries Al Jazeera is now seen as an American device for sowing dissent, it is still the biggest game in the Arab hearts-and-minds business and with a projected English language station, will extend its reach into non-Arabic-speaking Muslim countries like Pakistan and Indonesia. Washington, meanwhile, has so stepped up pressure on its ally Qatar that the Qatari government is said to be accelerating plans to put Al Jazeera, which runs at a loss, on the market. The station says it keeps its door open to views and news from all quarters. The democratic response would be to go through that door and join in the argument.

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