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Arabic for "credible"

Al-Jazeera is studied from the inside by a British journalist who speaks the language - and finds a first-rate news operation

By Steve Weinberg

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It is not easy working as a journalist at al-Jazeera, the Arabic language news channel funded by the royal family of Qatar, a tiny gas- and oil-rich nation located in the shadow of Saudi Arabia.

On the one hand, U.S. government officials and those speaking for other Western governments are suspicious of al-Jazeera journalists, believing they serve as a front for anti-American terrorists, including Osama bin Laden. On the other hand, the Saudi Arabian ruling class and viewers in other Arab-speaking nations are suspicious of al-Jazeera journalists, believing their editorial independence is harmful to the pan-Arabic goal of neutralizing Western-financed Israeli hegemony in the Middle East.

Amid all the stereotypes comes a mind-clearing book from Hugh Miles, an Arabic-speaking English journalist who grew up in the Middle East because of his diplomat father. Miles started paying close attention to al-Jazeera two years ago, during the American invasion of Iraq. Living in London as an employee of Sky News, Miles received an assignment to monitor three Arab television stations every day from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Because the Arab reporters had better entree into Iraq than Sky News journalists, Miles was supposed to identify footage unique to al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya and Abu Dhabi TV. Then Sky News could try to negotiate for that footage.

Although watching 12 consecutive hours of war video daily numbed Miles' mind, he found himself fascinated with the professionalism of al-Jazeera news programming. He realized his mind harbored more questions than answers: Who had founded the channel? How was it financed? Did it have a compromising relationship with bin Laden, as so many American critics claimed? Was it, as rumored, a handmaiden of the anti-American resistance in Iraq? What did Arab viewers think of the channel? Were the uncensored satellite broadcasts of al-Jazeera planting seeds for democracy throughout the Arab world, as Westerners seemed to believe a free media could do?

Miles realized that finding the answers would be arduous: "... Researching an Arab news network was not quite as straightforward as researching a Western one. Here, if we want to know something about a TV station, how many people in Britain have satellite TV or how much a thirty-second advertising slot during the Super Bowl costs, then we just look it up. But there is no reliable means, official or otherwise, of discovering this sort of information in the Arab world. We do not know what a Bedouin in the Sinai is watching on his satellite dish, nor what he thinks about it. In fact, asking these kinds of questions in Arab countries ... can land you in jail. Arab society is opaque, and statistics and demography are not part of ordinary life. And the answers to my questions were not on the Internet."

So Miles flew to Qatar, asked for permission from al-Jazeera management to interview the station's journalists, to visit its bureaus around the world. The answer: an unqualified yes.

"Since al-Jazeera had nothing to hide, they said, it was in their interest to let an independent observer have a snoop around, especially since the network was planning the launch of an English-language channel," he says.

Miles spent many days in Doha, the Qatari capital, as well as visiting al-Jazeera bureaus in Amman, Jordan; Cairo; Jerusalem; Ramallah, West Bank; London; Paris; New York; Washington, D.C.; and Detroit (whose suburb Dearborn is home to the largest Arabic-speaking population concentration in the U.S.). Also, Miles interviewed competing journalists, officials from many governments, media scholars and viewers of al-Jazeera.

For journalists who do not speak Arabic and thus have been unable to evaluate al-Jazeera for themselves, Miles' findings are enlightening. Although his generalizations are filled with nuanced exceptions, for the most part, Miles concludes that al-Jazeera runs a first-rate news operation, no more biased than, for instance, Fox News. Miles is certain al-Jazeera is not a tool of bin Laden or any other militant spouting anti-American rhetoric.

Until Sept. 11, 2001, Western government and news media officials generally ignored al-Jazeera or denigrated it as biased. But as worldwide sympathy for U.S. victims of 9/11 dissipated in the wake of heartless bombing runs across Afghanistan, the Bush administration decided it needed to win Arab hearts and minds. So its spokespeople showed up on al-Jazeera, all but one (former ambassador Christopher Ross) talking in English that had to be translated into Arabic. Their insincerity could not be masked by their words, in any language.

When not relating al-Jazeera's complicated evolution over the past decade or the wrongheaded stereotypes held by its blinded-by-prejudice critics, Miles provides fascinating vignettes of how the network's journalists ferret out the news despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles. One of the most fascinating is the investigative reporting of Yosri Fouda, an Egyptian on the network's multinational staff. Before joining al-Jazeera, Fouda taught communications at the American University of Cairo, worked on a doctorate at Glasgow University in Scotland, and trained at the British Broadcasting Corp., and The Associated Press.

"Since starting at al-Jazeera, this Egyptian sleuth has almost single-handedly pioneered the Arab tradition of investigative journalism," Miles says. "His investigations have taken him to some of the most God-forsaken parts of the planet, where he has met some of the most maniacal terrorists, and he has been arrested many times, but, so far at least, has always managed to come back unscathed."

At the end of the book, Miles notes that "the information age is upon us and in the decades ahead we can expect only more al-Jazeeras, adding to an ever greater torrent of information, as regional ideas spread around the world and become global. Things will never be how they were before." Then he turns the page over to Fouda.

"Freedom is like death," Fouda says. "You cannot visit death and then come back from it."

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