

## Business Standard

All that Jazeera ; Hugh Miles's book on Al-Jazeera traces the life of this...

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Hugh Miles's book on Al-Jazeera traces the life of this ground-breaking news channel, right from its inception in 1996 in the tiny Gulf emirate of Qatar. A complete anomaly in the Arab world, the channel was started when the comparatively liberal Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani seized power from his father in 1995. Educated largely abroad ("his first exposure to democracy was on a trip to London. And legend has it that the concept seemed so ridiculous to him that he had to be led in hysterical laughter from the House of Commons after witnessing his first parliamentary debate"), the present Emir came to the throne with a lot of new ideas, most of which were previously unheard of in the region, and among these was to start an independent news channel called Al-Jazeera.

The channel was an immediate success among its viewers, most of whom had spent years watching dreary state-sponsored television. Most media in the Arab world is state-run, airing little more than propaganda for the government—for instance, "even today, Egypt's Minister of Information telephones the Egyptian state news bureau [with specific instructions]. Egyptian news dedicates at least one bulletin every evening to the activities of the President's wife and favoured son, Gamal. Consequently the Egyptian national news still often looks more like the Mubarak family show." (This is extra worrying given that Egypt is one of the few "democracies" in the Middle East.) Thanks to Al-Jazeera, Miles argues, all this is changing.

Hugh Miles is a British journalist, and the son of an eminent diplomat who was stationed in the Middle East for years and was a vocal opponent of the recent war in Iraq. Miles himself is an Arabic speaker and has been reporting from the region since the 1970s. While this makes him an excellent inside-guide into the workings of the Arab world, it also afflicts the book with what is perhaps its only weakness: the fact that Miles cannot, with all the goodwill in the world, be described as balanced. He is vehemently anti-American, and a staunch supporter of Al-Jazeera at all times.

For instance, when he talks of the media war between Al-Jazeera and CNN, he is openly derisive about the practices of American news stations (don't get him started about Fox). He recounts CNN's many public relations failures (for example, attempting to dupe the public with an obviously doctored photograph of Bin Laden in a business suit to try and make Arab Muslims believe he had deserted their cause), and even gives a transcript of a conversation during the Afghan war between CNN presenter Paula Zahn and then Al-Jazeera Washington bureau chief Hafez Al-Mirazi. Paula Zahn comes off as boorish and patronising (she calls him "Mr Al-Mirzari" and "Mr Mazari" throughout, despite many mild corrections from him), insisting that CNN coverage has been fair and completely unbiased, while Al-Mirazi gets in a couple of sharp points ("[Al-Jazeera] does what American media cannot do, which is not to mix patriotism with journalism"), and completely undermines her.

Miles is also drily contemptuous of the American public relations campaign to promote themselves in the eyes of the east, and takes great glee in recounting how none of these attempts got off the ground. For instance, the American government hired a "former Madison Avenue advertising executive named Charlotte Beers to craft a 'public diplomacy' campaign to win hearts and minds for military action in Afghanistan and the War on Terror," only to be booed offstage by most of the Arab world. American radio stations in Afghanistan are laughed at; the Americans release a film about how well they treat American Arabs, only to find that Middle Eastern Arabs couldn't care less how American Arabs live; and of course, there is much muffled giggling over various Bush gaffes, for instance naming the Afghan bombing "Operation Infinite Justice" and calling himself a crusader.

However, despite his obvious leanings (he doesn't heap praise on any Arab leader either, far from it in fact), Miles's book makes a gripping read. Al-Jazeera first came to the fore in the Arab world with the second Palestinian intifada in 2000; caught the entire world's eye with its coverage of 9/11; and moved from strength to strength with its extensive and exhaustive coverage of successive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. All these form separate chapters in the book.

It is his alternation of commentary, anecdotal evidence (first- and second-hand—he seems to have a close relationship with most of the important figures in Al-Jazeera and they in turn have enthralling stories to tell), and investigative journalism (his last two chapters about public opinion on Al-Jazeera in the Arab world and America are fascinating) that makes this book a success; and of course, it is topical, given that the eye of the world now is on Al-Jazeera and the turmoil and flux in the Arab world.

Towards the end he considers (but does not dwell on) the debate over democratisation in the Middle East. Al-Jazeera is obviously not going to single-handedly lead to the liberalisation of the Middle East, but a free media is probably one of the more important pieces of the jigsaw. Al-Jazeera swims against the tide: in the west, it is seen as a tool of Al-Qaeda, with close ties within that organisation (their reporter Taysir Alluni's interview with Osama bin Laden, which CNN later aired even though Al-Jazeera did not, was cited by the US as evidence of this supposed link); and in the Arab world, it is seen as a Zionist conspiracy and an American tool. From the moment it started broadcasting, one Arab country after another has been outraged by its policies and programmes—from Bahrain to Kuwait to Jordan and especially Saudi Arabia, which Miles conjectures is annoyed mostly because of the shift in American loyalties from Saudi to Qatar. Governments have shut down Al-Jazeera bureaux, they rant and rave against their programmes, and when they find they cannot win some even start their own rival television channels.

Despite never having made a profit (it is still heavily funded by the Qatari government), Al-Jazeera has gone from strength to strength, and is even starting a new channel in English later this year. Despite most of the western world making it out to be a mouthpiece of terrorism, Miles obviously thinks that it is the single strongest beacon of democracy in the Middle East, (its motto, roughly translated, is "the opinion and the other opinion"—it was even the first to bring Israeli opinions on the air in the Arab world, much to the Arabs' horror), and, as you finish his book, you may find yourself agreeing with him.