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Mark Bearn reviews *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World* by Hugh Miles

"How do I respond when I see that in some Islamic countries there is a vitriolic hatred of America?" President Bush asked after the terrorist attacks of September 11. "I'm amazed. I'm amazed." Had he been watching a little more al-Jazeera and a little less Fox News, he would not have felt so stumped. As Hugh Miles reminds us in his history of the Qatar-based Arabic station, the struggle for public opinion in today's Middle East is as aggressive as that for land or political power, and al-Jazeera "sits at the centre of the storm".

Western policymakers have much to learn from this stylish, highly intelligent, somewhat polemical book. Miles, a young Oxford-educated Arabist, travelled from Amman, Jordan, to Washington DC, interviewing ordinary Arabs, policy-makers and al-Jazeera journalists in an effort to understand better the channel once dubbed "Bin Laden TV". His research has produced a nuanced and sympathetic guide to the channel itself, and a fascinating narrative of the information war raging in the Arab world.

Why is al-Jazeera so controversial? The station itself is puny. It has just 70 correspondents worldwide and a budget of \$40 million a year. Created by Qatar's liberal-minded, Sandhurst-educated Emir in 1996, its structure resembles the BBC's: state-funded, yet independent of government control. Its motto is the innocuous-sounding "the opinion and the other opinion" and its fare is news, documentaries and talk shows. Yet in eight years this fledgling channel has broken every taboo in Arabic broadcasting, reaped one of the world's largest TV audiences (40 million) and earned the opprobrium of politicians from east to west.

To the Middle East's unelected authoritarian leaders al-Jazeera represents a spreading "gangrene", in the phrasing of the Saudi newspaper al-Watan. Popular talk shows such as *The Opposite Direction*, hosted by a Syrian with a doctorate in English drama ("I like defrocking political and religious leaders," he tells Miles), discuss women's rights and militant Islam, and exiled Arab dissidents regularly appear as guests. To the fury of Arab politicians, news anchors frequently interview Israelis and American neo-conservatives. Al-Jazeera bureaux have been closed and its correspondents harassed and arrested across the Middle East. In 1999 the Algerian government shut down the entire power supply to Algiers, simply to silence one al-Jazeera programme.

Western leaders have been equally critical. Al-Jazeera's emergence as the chosen source for Osama bin Laden's messages led Donald Rumsfeld to dismiss it as "a mouthpiece for al-Qa'eda and a vehicle of anti-American propaganda". US missiles destroyed its offices in Kabul and Baghdad and killed its Baghdad correspondent. Another of its cameramen was tortured in Abu Ghraib.

To Miles, these attacks on al-Jazeera are simply "shooting the messenger", but this is a little simplistic. He skates lightly over al-Jazeera's alarming penchant for showing graphic images of dead Palestinian babies and ambushed American Humvees. Such sensationalism only inflames Arab passions and arouses Western suspicions of partiality.

Nor are al-Jazeera's articulate and forthright journalists free from accusations of bias: most are openly pro-Palestinian in their sympathies and, like most Arabs, viewed the Iraq war as "a colonial conflict". The channel is also hamstrung, however unfairly, by its own journalistic successes. The more interviews it obtains with al-Qa'eda militants, the more open it is to damaging if unsubstantiated allegations of links to terrorist organisations.

None the less, Miles's key argument is a powerful one: al-Jazeera's influence is vast, and the channel's openness to all opinions is potentially a powerful force for building democratic discussion in the Middle East. By contrast, American engagement with Arab opinion – so-called "public diplomacy" – has been an embarrassing fiasco. Does anyone remember the tough-talking Madison Avenue executive, Charlotte Beers, recruited by the State Department to sell "Brand America" to Arabs? Or Commando Solo, a vast US Air Force cargo plane that flew above Afghanistan and later Iraq broadcasting crude propaganda ("Attention Taliban. You are condemned. Did you know that?")? The American-run al-Iraqiyah TV station in Iraq "squandered millions of dollars forging an unshakeable reputation for tiresome propaganda", according to Miles, and its biggest audience has been 10 per cent of Iraqis. Al-Jazeera is watched by 70 per cent of the country.

Despite their understandable qualms, Western leaders will need to engage much more fully with al-Jazeera if they are serious about building a democratic Middle East. As Miles writes, "from the swankiest suburbs of Dubai to the poorest slums of the Palestinian refugee camps, Arabs are watching al-Jazeera". Yet even today, three years after 9/11, the US has only five official spokesmen fluent enough in Arabic to appear on the channel.