

Battle Station**Reviewed by Dennis Ross | 30 January 2005**

Controversy and al-Jazeera seem to go hand in hand. Broadcast out of Qatar, this Arab news channel is often portrayed in the West as a purveyor of anti-American bile that incites violence in Iraq, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But many Arabs -- including millions of loyal viewers -- see the station as an independent source of news in a region where dictators and kings have historically kept a stranglehold on the flow of information. For its admirers, al-Jazeera represents a long-overdue revolution in Arab media. In *Al-Jazeera*, **Hugh Miles** not only shares this view, he also argues that al-Jazeera is a highly professional news organization -- indeed, one that "is less biased than any of the mainstream American news networks."

Miles, a Saudi-born British journalist and consultant, traces the channel's genesis -- from the initial failure of a joint news venture between the BBC and the Saudi government to the emir of Qatar's decision to fund an independent news network. He also explains how al-Jazeera's round-the-clock coverage of two huge recent news stories -- the start of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 and the post-9/11 U.S.-led war in Afghanistan (where the network had the only news bureau in Kabul, as well as special access to the Taliban) -- made it a valued source of news in the region. It's now far more trusted than the wheezing state-run stations, to say nothing of the fledgling U.S.-sponsored channel al-Hurra.

To be sure, as Miles observes, it was not just its news coverage that produced such a wide following for al-Jazeera: Its talk shows also transformed television viewing in the Arab world. These programs were lively, controversial and taboo-breaking. They sometimes informed and more often titillated, and they simply had no precedent in the Arab world. "The Opposite Direction," for example, is a Middle Eastern version of CNN's "Crossfire," and "Religion and Life" features a leading cleric, Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who presents his views on the Islamic approach to even mundane matters. (Of course, he also offers self-styled religious edicts endorsing the killing of U.S. civilian contractors in Iraq and Israelis riding the bus to work.)

Even as al-Jazeera was breaking barriers and offering hard-hitting news, Miles observes, it ran into problems with nearly every Arab regime. From Egypt to Algeria to the Gulf, the channel was either shut down or on the verge of having the plug pulled at one time or another. The Saudis even used their clout to block much of its advertising market; according to Miles, Riyadh threatened potential advertisers like the Swedish telecommunications company Ericsson with the loss of their contracts if they bought commercial time. This helps explain why al-Jazeera, for all its regional popularity, still can't operate without extensive subsidies from the Qatari government. (Al-Jazeera is Arabic for "the peninsula," a reference to Qatar's location in the Gulf.)

But according to Miles, this dependency on the emir of Qatar has not affected the network's editorial freedom. For Miles, the anger that al-Jazeera generates from so many quarters is proof of its independence, fairness and accuracy. After all, he argues, if the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Saddam Hussein and Islamist radicals could all be critical of al-Jazeera, "there could be no substance to allegations of bias."

You'd be right to get the picture that Miles believes that al-Jazeera can do little wrong. Yes, he acknowledges near the end of the book that the channel does have a point of view, but that doesn't alter his belief that al-Jazeera is less biased than its American counterparts. (Full disclosure: I have a contract to provide on-air commentary for Fox News.) Miles seems almost mesmerized by al-Jazeera's professionalism and its motto: "The opinion and the other opinion." For him and the al-Jazeera journalists he quotes, airing both sides is what makes the coverage inherently balanced.

But are all opinions really equal, regardless of their content? Are any points of view unacceptable? For both al-Jazeera and Miles, the answer seems to be no, at least when it comes to attacking the United States or Israel. Osama bin Laden certainly is newsworthy, but having watched al-Jazeera's coverage of him, I've concluded that it treats him less as a newsmaker (however despicable) and more as someone representing a legitimate point of view. To be sure, bin Laden seeks to exploit the deep sense of rage, betrayal and helplessness that pervades the Arab world. But al-Jazeera also plays to these impulses and provides an ongoing platform for jihadists to exploit them. Small wonder, then, that al-Jazeera operates on the premise that if you show President Bush representing one point of view, you should also show bin Laden or one of his supporters. Similarly, when Hamas's now-dead leader, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, was blessing Palestinian suicide bombings against Israeli civilians -- even before the current intifada began in 2000 -- al-Jazeera served as his megaphone.

Nor does al-Jazeera truly show all points of view. It has Israelis on the air regularly, but does it ever interview extremist settlers? Do its news reports acknowledge the threat -- both physical and political -- that they pose to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon? Recognizing Sharon's battle with Israel's radical right doesn't fit the al-Jazeera agenda of portraying him as the driving force behind the Israeli occupation that the station so abhors. Al-Jazeera clearly makes an editorial judgment here and excludes views it considers beyond the pale. But it exercises no such judgment when it comes to broadcasting hateful, even violent views of America.

Al-Jazeera also considers it fair play to broadcast strikingly gory images from Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza -- visuals that add to the region's anger and resentment. True, al-Jazeera is not the source of that anger, but its whole approach is designed to play to it.

Unfortunately, Miles does not question this approach -- largely because he shares the channel's basic predisposition against the United States, believing that both the war in Iraq and U.S. support for Israel are wrong. Anti-American fury in the Arab and Islamic worlds is justified, Miles says, so don't blame al-Jazeera for it.

In fact, I don't. But why shouldn't al-Jazeera live up to its credo? Why shouldn't it question what Arabs are doing to themselves, rather than just condemning what non-Arabs are doing to the region? Why doesn't it talk about the failings of education in the Arab world? Why doesn't it expose Islamist madrassas that teach hatred toward the outside world? Why can't it debunk mythologies, rather than spreading risible conspiracy theories (like blaming Israel's Mossad for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks)? Why can't it seriously question what the intifada has cost Palestinians rather than glorifying suicide bombers as "martyrs"?

These questions are particularly important precisely because al-Jazeera now has such credibility in the Arab world. It could use its power to promote greater responsibility, but so far it hasn't. Leaving aside Miles's obvious disdain for the Bush administration, his book would have been far more useful if he'd

been more open to addressing al-Jazeera's weaknesses and less determined to dismiss its critics. In the end, if you want to get a better picture of al-Jazeera, even a sympathetic one, I'd recommend seeing the recent documentary "Control Room" instead. It takes less time and makes a fairer case. *

Dennis Ross, a former U.S. Middle East envoy, is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is the author of "The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace."

[The Washington Post](#)

Letters

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Broadcast News

While Dennis Ross purports to offer a critique of Hugh Miles's Al-Jazeera (Book World, Jan. 30), he in fact uses the opportunity to direct an unwarranted and unsubstantiated attack against al-Jazeera, the satellite channel viewed by more people in the world than any other Arabic station.

Throughout his review, Ross questions the author's credibility and outright states that he is not objective in his review of al-Jazeera. Because Miles concludes that al-Jazeera is a "highly professional news organization" that "is less biased than any of the mainstream American news networks," the reviewer concludes, without any support, that Miles "shares the channel's basic predisposition against the United States, believing that both the war in Iraq and U.S. support for Israel are wrong."

Interestingly, however, Ross does not question or even raise his potential predispositions, including his affiliation with a political think tank in Washington known for its pro-Israeli policies. The reviewer does claim to provide "full disclosure" by revealing that he has a contract with Fox News, but he fails to disclose that he has also appeared many times as a guest on al-Jazeera, including a recent appearance in which he appeared for more than 30 minutes on the weekly program "Min Washington" ("From Washington") to promote his book *The Missing Peace*.

Ultimately, Ross attempts to support his view that al-Jazeera is not objective by listing a series of stories and viewpoints he claims it never covered, when in fact it has. He asks: Do we "ever interview extremist settlers?" Answer: yes. Do we report on Ariel Sharon's "battle with Israel's radical right"? Answer: yes. Do we "talk about the failings of education in the Arab world?" Answer: yes. Do we "question what the intifada has cost Palestinians"? Answer: yes. Did we "debunk mythologies . . . like blaming Israel's Mossad for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks"? Answer: yes, including during a special broadcast of President Bush's first speech to Congress following 9/11, where the Washington anchor made specific reference to the president's condolences to, among others, the Israeli victims of the attacks, noting that their very existence debunked the theory that Israelis had prior knowledge. And do we "question what Arabs are doing to themselves, rather than just condemning what non-Arabs are doing to the region?" Answer: yes, so often and so strongly that, as the author of the book and the

reviewer both acknowledge, al-Jazeera has been shut down and criticized by almost all of the Arab governments -- not just the American and Israeli ones.

Understanding of al-Jazeera in the Western world is greatly hampered by a lack of knowledge of Arabic. Americans know the station only from what Western media outlets report. Yes, as the reviewer acknowledges, "Osama bin Laden certainly is newsworthy," but al-Jazeera has actually aired hours of speeches by President Bush and mere minutes by bin Laden -- hardly what one would call equal time.

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Dennis Ross replies:

It appears that my review of Hugh Miles's book has struck a nerve. Is al-Jazeera credible throughout the Arab world? Absolutely, which is one of the reasons I have appeared on it often, and not only to discuss my book. Apart from observing that Miles tended to avoid criticizing the network because he shared its basic predispositions, my basic point was that al-Jazeera could do much more to challenge the mythologies in the area. It does make clear editorial judgments about what it considers legitimate and illegitimate; every news organization does. But al-Jazeera's editorial bent is such that no story that deepens anger toward the United States appears to be considered inappropriate. My hope for al-Jazeera is that it will use its credibility to promote responsibility in the region and not simply play to the lowest common denominator, reinforcing hatred and anger and not challenging those who offer only hostility and hopelessness for the future.