

The Independent**BY Yasmin Alibhai-Brown | JANUARY 14, 2005****Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV news challenged the world by Hugh Miles**

The Arab satellite TV channel al-Jazeera, only eight years old, has become one of the strongest players in the global media game. Hugh Miles, a bright young journalist and Arabist, recounts the remarkable story in this book, which is mostly a hagiography but pacy, nicely written and well contextualised.

Our masters in the US and UK still insist that the September 11 onslaught was an unparalleled atrocity which demanded an exceptional response, a response that had to be free of established moral or legal accountability. The vortex of American grief has reshaped the planet itself, and all purposes, identities and allegiances. Most people around the globe yield to the new world disorder (what choice do they have?) but have never accepted the premise. Yes, the hijackers were callous and audacious, and al-Qa'ida operates outside any comprehensible political framework. But millions die needlessly, and Americans mostly ignore their pain.

In this age of mass interconnection, the world is more profoundly divided than it ever was during the Cold War. Then, authoritarian methods, propaganda and espionage prevented bonds developing between the citizens of the west and the ex-Soviet Union. Mistrust between the US and its allies and the Muslim world today has grown fast, without any such expensive plotting or policing. Muslims no longer believe a word of what western politicians say. After September 11, Iraq, the betrayals of the Palestinians, all they can manage is faux compliance. The Western media too is suspect, including the long-revered BBC, which colludes happily with tight censorship measures imposed by the allies in Iraq and is believed to have a pro-Israel bias.

As Muslims become hungry for freedoms and democracy, they increasingly walk away from the state-controlled bilge fed to them by their governments. They will not be duped. And this is the cleared ground on which the fiercely independent al-Jazeera has planted itself, a tough tree which sprouts and spreads through the deserts of the Middle East. All the international networks, richer, bigger, have been left reeling.

The station was launched in 1996 in the kingdom of Qatar, where the reformist Emir Sheikh Hamad is pushing his nation to develop modern sensibilities and political maturity. He gave al-Jazeera more than \$130m and freedom to operate without intervention. His own people were astounded, says Miles; such things never happened in Arab countries. The intrepid journalists came from the BBC World Service and the blighted "Petrodollar Channel", an Arabic service jointly launched by the BBC and the Saudi regime which ended in tears because the Saudis wanted to control content. Al-Jazeera is now watched by over 50 million, and growth is unstoppable. Young Muslim children want to work for the channel when they grow up. Governments hate it; Osama Bin Laden loves it. The journalists are denounced as spies, terrorists, Jew-haters and as unIslamic, unpatriotic traitors. Some have been imprisoned and tortured, even killed - often by countries which profess great freedoms.

The US has ordered the Emir to rein in the station, instructions he ignores. As Miles observes: "It was ironic that the puritanical Taliban tolerated al-Jazeera but the US would not." Scores of other governments have tried to throttle the upstart broadcaster, which carries on undaunted.

But serious journalism is more than provocation. The channel needs to move beyond the juvenile phase. It sells itself as a neutral conduit but the balance is questionable. Reports are often crude and cruel, indifferent to the impact they must make. Maturity means higher standards and motives. Miles doesn't interrogate material which seems to have been passed on by al-Jazeera to us, the readers, without adequate testing.

That said, al-Jazeera is indisputably dynamic and exemplary in the way it has stood up to megalomaniacs who have silenced or co-opted much of the Fourth Estate since September 11. And after reading this informative book, you do understand the inestimable value of journalistic fearlessness.