

## **The Calgary Herald**

Inside al-Jazeera: How a blip on the screen became the focus of hatred and heated politicking

By Timothy Giannuzzi

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Luck is a funny thing. In 1996, the emir of the tiny Gulf state of Qatar provided financing for a new satellite news channel. Al-Jazeera was going to be open-minded, independent and credible. Its motto, "the opinion and the other opinion," meant that people of all political persuasions would be able to express themselves, making al-Jazeera a fresh voice in a Middle East starved for serious political debate -- if it could only attract an audience.

Relegated to a weak position on a crowded broadcasting satellite, al-Jazeera was no more than a minor blip on the screen. Then, it got lucky. In the summer of 1997, a French station which held the most powerful broadcasting position on the satellite accidentally broadcast pornography instead of an Arabic children's show. The station was promptly given the boot by the satellite's Saudi owners, opening up the position for al-Jazeera.

Quickly expanding and generating controversy, al-Jazeera might have remained only a thorn in the side of Arab governments had it not luckily accepted the Taliban's invitation to open a bureau in Afghanistan in 2000. After 9/11, al-Jazeera had a monopoly on coverage of the American attack.

**Hugh Miles's** book is a solid attempt to trace the network's rise from niche market to household word. Miles crisscrossed the globe, speaking to al-Jazeera staff as well as to government officials, academics and ordinary people to gauge the network's effect. What he mostly succeeds in doing is highlighting an incredible amount of hypocrisy.

Before 9/11, the American government was only too happy to heap praise on al-Jazeera for the station's shows which allow guests to attack fossilized Arab dictatorships. The Arab governments were less than pleased and routinely labelled al-Jazeera a Zionist American mouthpiece.

However, in the aftermath of terrorist strikes, war and the self-censorship practised by the American media, al-Jazeera stood out all the more. It showed missile strikes, collateral damage and the statements of terrorists. The American government promptly accused al-Jazeera of being a mouthpiece for al-Qaeda and of having advance knowledge of terrorist activity.

Miles has done his research and thoroughly describes al-Jazeera's development, as well as the trials and tribulations it suffered as it gained in notoriety. Although he obviously sees al-Jazeera as the brave little station that could, he does his best to be even-handed. He rightly criticizes the sense of world-beating naivete which al-Jazeera's success has fostered in its staff and he gives plenty of space to the station's critics, including a U.S. State Department official who says, "To a certain extent, we believe in the freedom of the press, but this isn't the press. It's very much a tabloid and I think that it increases the odds of terrorism acts."

One flag-draped pundit from the American Enterprise Institute, a think-tank, swears to Miles that she will personally mobilize the U.S. government to destroy al-Jazeera if it ever starts English broadcasts in North America.

Miles skillfully unravels the skein of hatred and heated politicking that surrounds the network, making this an insightful, fair and plain-spoken work. Although, whether someone like Osama bin Laden really counts as "the other opinion" is doubtful.

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