

Ham and High (Hampstead local paper)

Arab channel is good news for free speech

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THE Arab nations have long been cursed with the worst media in the world, as journalist Hugh Miles confirms in this fascinating and accessible book.

Traditionally, their newspapers, radio and television stations have been corrupt, sycophantic, self-pitying, paranoid and, above all, anti-Jewish.

As a reporter who is not Jewish, I can assure you that - unless they are cynically posturing at their masters' command - Arab hacks really do seem to hate Jews, the United States, and the West.

But perhaps I am being less than fair. Some of my best friends are Arab journalists, admirable and talented people, whose balanced works are full of good solid information, and who glow with integrity and enthusiasm. The problem is that they have been forced to work in exile, often in this country, the USA or France.

As Miles points out, there was virtually nowhere in the Arab world where honest Arab journalists could ply their trade without prostituting themselves. That is, until eight years ago when the controversial television network Al Jazeera went on air from the tiny but gas-rich and staunchly pro-American Emirate of Qatar.

Al Jazeera was the first independent, world-class, Arab-owned and edited, 24-hour, news and discussion station. It sent shockwaves through the Middle East.

Predictably, a number of undemocratic Arab nations (and they are, alas, all undemocratic really), refused to allow it to open bureaux on their territory.

Al Jazeera deliberately courted controversy. It allowed unprecedented, live debates on sensitive political and religious matters, and had no problems about contributors who launched vitriolic attacks on Arab regimes and their leaders - including the Emir of Qatar.

Its large, talented and experienced team of journalists (many ex-BBC) successfully sought live and uncensored interviews with Arab pariahs such as Saddam and Gadaffi - and with American leaders, as well as Israeli politicians, at a time when the very word "Israel" was usually deemed too controversial to be uttered on Islamic airwaves.

Of course it made mistakes. Some gung-ho politicians in this country and the United States who saw, a few years later, the raw and bloody footage it generated from war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as from Palestine, were alarmed and infuriated. America and the new regime in Iraq accused Al Jazeera of deliberately fomenting violence, and one of its senior executives was arrested in Spain and charged with being an active agent for al-Qaeda.

The fact that the station had become al-Qaeda's outlet of choice for its propaganda tapes was regarded with a mixture of suspicion and distaste - but also with professional admiration - by most Western journalists. A scoop is a scoop - but you can get too close to your sources.

So how and why was Al Jazeera created? Hugh Miles, son of a British diplomat, born in Saudi Arabia, educated at Eton and in Libya, and then at Oxford, where he read Arabic, is well-qualified to tell the tale.

He describes the birth of Al Jazeera, which is funded by Qatar's deeply eccentric, religious but reform-minded ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. The Emir's aim really does seem to be to create a major, independent network, which should, in time, become self-financing. Miles found little if any evidence of self-censorship or of political interference by the Emir.

It is easy to suspend one's normal journalistic cynicism, and occasionally I sense that Miles has done so. But whatever one's reservations, there is something very impressive about the earnest young network which has been accused of being the conscious agent of Israel, of the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas, Saddam's Iraq, and the CIA.

And of one thing I am certain. With audiences in excess of 50million, the hugely influential network is doing more than al-Qaeda to subvert the corrupt regimes and the corrupt news outlets, which once flourish unchallenged, throughout the Middle East.