

The Guardian

Kicking sand in the eyes of bullies: Al-Jazeera has broadcast a sometimes unpalatable view of Middle East reality,

By James Buchan

12 February 2005

Since its launch in 1996, the Arabic-language satellite television network al-Jazeera has transformed broadcasting in and on the subject of the Middle East. Claiming up to 50 million viewers, al-Jazeera ("the peninsula", as in "the Arabian peninsula") rivals the BBC in its reach. It now plans to broadcast in English.

Al-Jazeera's success shows that the Arab world, as well as generating much of our foreign news, can also report it for us. We are shown - amid the usual satellite TV rubbish - news bulletins that authentically reflect the violence of the Middle East. Raucous talk shows reveal an Arab public that is resentful, anti-Jewish and anti-western. The al-Jazeera websites, English and Arabic, are a mixture of good information and incredible conspiracies.

The young British Arabist Hugh Miles tells the story of al-Jazeera's rise. In the spring of 1996, the BBC World Service's Arabic television station became exasperated by demands from its Saudi partner to censor its reports and shut down. About 120 of its journalists migrated to a new station being set up in the Gulf emirate of Qatar.

Launched in late 1996 with a loan of 500m dinars (\$137m) from the emir, the station has never turned a profit and continues to be subsidised by the Qatari government to the tune of many millions each year. Nobody seems very interested in its financing, and that includes this author. While causing the Qataris no end of headaches with Saudi Arabia and the US, al-Jazeera has added greatly to the prestige of the little emirate and is probably more secure than it looks. Al-Jazeera symbolises the shift in the centre of the Arab world in the past 30 years from the old Levant - Egypt, Lebanon, Syria - to the Gulf shore.

Miles shows how the station wiped the floor with its competitors, beginning with the uprising or intifada that broke out in the Israeli occupied territories in 2000. Having taken the trouble to cultivate the Taliban and the Bin Laden organisation, al-Jazeera was poised on September 11 2001 to score a series of spectacular scoops, including taped communiques from Bin Laden and an interview with two planners of the September 11 attack at a secret address in Karachi in 2002. Originally scorned by the western networks, al-Jazeera is now their chief source of our knowledge in regions, such as parts of central Iraq, where it is impossible for a western reporter to work in safety.

Miles stresses the courage and outstanding enterprise of al-Jazeera's reporters, and reminds us that before Walid al-Omary began working in Israel and the occupied territories, many Arab viewers never heard an Israeli speak. On the other hand, he accepts on balance that before the war of 2003, al-Jazeera's offices in Doha were penetrated by Ba'athist agents (what Arab news organisation wasn't?).

To put it mildly, al-Jazeera reporters have come very close to some very nasty characters both in Iraq and among the Bin Ladenites. Yet, for Miles, nothing could justify the US attacks on al-Jazeera offices, first in Kabul on November 12 2001 and then on April 8 2003 in Baghdad, where their journalist Tareq Ayyoubi was killed. As the son of Sir Oliver Miles, a former Arabist ambassador who has sharply criticised the Blair government's policy in Iraq, Hugh Miles has inherited the old mandarin contempt for American public policy in the near east.

The main narrative ends in the autumn of 2003. There is nothing about the two battles of Falluja, or the ghoulish procession of masked kidnappers and their victims across the network through summer 2004. Last August, the Allawi government shut down al-Jazeera's office in Baghdad and it has not reopened. But the network can still scoop its rivals, as with the footage of the downed C-130 aircraft on election day. The last two chapters of the book run to more than 100 pages, but add little to what has been said earlier.

In the old style of Arab television, unruffled kings and calm presidents passed to and fro through airport reception halls talking of regional and Arab interests. In reminding the Arab public that their leaders sometimes call each other dogs, al-Jazeera may, according to Miles, have increased frustration. He writes: "If someone in Egypt or Saudi Arabia watching al-Jazeera changes their mind about a certain issue . . . they cannot go out and vote in an election . . . but it is not al-Jazeera's fault." In fact, many Arabs regard al-Jazeera as a tool of Israeli intelligence, the British, the US, the Saudis, or all four.

If al-Jazeera is a champion of democracy in the Arab world, it is democracy of a particular kind. The great complaint of Iraqi acquaintances of this reviewer is that it has never given the post-Ba'ath government of Iraq a moment's hearing. As Miles puts it: "Never once in the 21 days of conflict did al-Jazeera acknowledge that invading Iraq had any thing to do with democratisation: it was a colonial conflict."

There is no doubt that a new public is being created in the Arab world, similar to that made by the transistor radio 50 years ago and exploited by Gamal Abdul Nasser's Saut al-Arab ("Voice of the Arabs"). Cairo Radio galvanised what used to be called the Arab masses, and shook those stately kings and presidents in their airport lounges before leading the Arabs to defeat in war in 1967.

Arabs themselves like to say that they think of their honour before their liberty or even the material comforts of their lives. In that case, al-Jazeera seems to me less a force for democracy in the Arab world than for a vibrant Arab nationalism of a neo-Nasserist or even - why not? - a neo-Saddamist character. This nationalism may bring freedom and prosperity in its wake. All we can say is that it didn't last time.