

Al Quds al-Arabi

By Samir Nassif

Al-Jazeera How the Arab News Challenged the World

Hugh Miles' book "Al-Jazeera: How the Arab News Challenged the World" traces the course of the establishment of the Broadcasting Company in Qatar in 1996, its early days on air and the reception it received, then proceeds to report the impact the station had on the coverage of the major events unfolding in the Middle East since its inception, and finally concludes with some reflections on the impact it has had globally on Arabs and their perception of events happening back home.

The book can be viewed as a highly detailed, well researched historical study of the development of the most important broadcasting network to have emerged from the Middle East and in this regard carries much relevance for those interested in what goes on behind the scenes in a major political broadcasting network. In addition Al-Jazeera's intricate involvement in much of the news events that unravelled in the region makes it a highly informative source for those interested in behind the scenes political developments underlying the main events affecting in the region over the last 7 years whilst not being shy in asking the bigger questions regarding the social/political impact of introducing free press in the region and its relevance to the plan of democratisation of the Arab peoples - a highly topical subject today.

Hugh Miles explains in the opening chapter that he first came across Al-Jazeera in 1998 whilst working as a media researcher for BSKyB. After his bosses had noticed the unique access to news stories emanating from the channel he was asked to write a report on the Al-Jazeera network. The initial study gave him the idea for the book.

The subsequent chapters describe the first programmes to be aired on Al-Jazeera and the viewer reception of such programmes predominantly emanating from the Arab world. One particular programme 'Opposite Direction' hosted by Dr Faysal Al Kassem was a revelation in itself in that for the first time highly controversial subjects were openly debated. (The role of Syria in Lebanon, the human rights records of the various Arab governments, the role of women in the Arab world). Not only were viewer numbers rising exponentially given the perceived free medium with which

they could finally air their views, but Arab governments were also starting to notice.

Throughout its progress in becoming the major broadcasting channel in the region Al-Jazeera used its content (rather than any major advertising campaign) as its main marketing apparatus to seep through the consciousness of the people in the Middle East region.

Indeed it is one of the most remarkable features of Al-Jazeera that it has been the people (its viewers) who have pushed the station to reach the heights and level of penetration it has reached rather than any particular financial backers (the station has been largely loss making throughout its history). In this sense the story of Al-Jazeera is one that has a lot to say for the debate about where power is to lie in the future in the media industry in the Middle East, as elsewhere.

A number of Arab governments in the last 9 years have banned the station because of a news story or expression of opinion that didn't fall into line with their agenda, but due to the advanced technologies available it has not been impossible to stop viewer access.

Governments have now largely resigned themselves to the fact that the station is going to continue to cover news stories and that their loyal viewer base were going to continue watching as long as they perceived the actual content to be worthy. In this regard, for Arab governments, it has been the first harsh lesson with regards to the powerful irreversible force of globalisation in creating social/political change.

Hugh Miles describes the incredible threats that the station and its staff were placed under throughout its early days from governments and extremist groups in the Middle East. These were difficult times where the loyalty of the staff was tested but nevertheless coverage continued and the station gained wider presence and captured more and more groundbreaking stories.

The question as to who is behind the channel financially/politically is loosely discussed as well. Although it is well documented that it is the Qatari government which established the channel and has continued to fund it in difficult times, it is very difficult to assess whether other governments and/or individuals may be involved as backers. Hugh Miles describes some of the theories that emanated – in particular those linking Al-Qaeda with Al-Jazeera – due to the way in which Osama Bin Laden used it as a medium to voice his views after the September 11th 2001 event and

during the Afghan/Iraqi conflicts. Whilst the author does not seek to give a definitive opinion on any of those theories there is nevertheless implicit in his analysis the view that given its Arab nationalist leaning and sometimes unique access to footage and politicians (in particular during the Afghan war it was the only channel to have access in the Taliban areas) and the fact that it served to balance the Western press view (with actual images of what was going on on the ground in conflicts such as Afghanistan, Iraq) the extremist organisations whilst desperate to find a medium to reveal their message considered it the most objective channel by which to do so. The latter does not indicate that a relationship needed to exist between extremist groups and Al-Jazeera but merely that it was perhaps the most acceptable channel for them to air their views. This view is reinforced by the fact that at various times the same extremist groups have taken offence at Al-Jazeera's reporting and threatened to bomb their offices or murder some of their crew.

It is interesting that even though the Qatari government is viewed as probably the main financial backer, the station nevertheless was happy to criticise the Qatari government in its role in the Iraqi conflict thereby maintaining its sympathetic Arab nationalist view whilst also being free to criticise its own backer. This throws into question whether anyone really has any overall influence on the direction of reporting at Al-Jazeera, or whether it is a deliberate policy by its backers to assert its independence.

As Al-Jazeera has grown it has sought to internationalise itself by adopting an English translation service in collaboration with the BBC. This project though on the cards since 2002 has not led to fruition largely due to political/financial reasons. There is no doubt, nevertheless, that such a development could have huge repercussions in bringing the expatriate Arab community who no longer speak their mother tongue in touch with world events affecting their regions with a more Arab leaning voice.

The importance of Al-Jazeera globally has been manifested in the forced acceptance of it as a legitimate broadcasting channel by the leaders of the Western world. Hugh Miles discusses the time when Blair had to go live on air and sit for an interview with Al-Jazeera in spite of the fact that the station had been criticised by his own government only months before for the way it had shown images of Bin Laden and encouraging Arab radicalism,

In the final chapter Hugh Miles concludes by describing his journey to the southern states in America and conducting interviews with Arab expats (many of whom are avid Al-Jazeera viewers) to try and decipher the role that Al-Jazeera has had on their interpretation of events back home and their perception of their Arab identity.

It is interesting that some of the respondents whilst pointing to the fact that Al-Jazeera has offered them a communication medium with which the Arab voice appears to be represented and their frustration at western biased news relieved, nevertheless, point to the fact that watching Al-Jazeera makes them feel more despondent about events because they feel they hear about the cruel raw facts but realize with frustration that there is little they can do about events. Hearing about such things actually makes them feel more alienated and depressed than had they not known the painful truth. Being so far away from their original homes makes them additionally despondent about what they can do to change things. In this regard, Hugh Miles makes an interesting point in allowing the reader to see that whilst there are benefits for Al-Jazeera in allowing the peoples' of the Arab world to speak freely and by doing so make a change, for expats living abroad and their quest to assimilate and form an identity it could be a source of continuing alienation from their environment.

Finally Miles concludes by addressing the theory that Al-Jazeera's inception if not intentionally created as such may well be serving as the most effective tool in the Western backed agenda for democratisation of the region.

After all how better to introduce the Arab world to the concept of having a voice and voting other than through free debate on Al-Jazeera's programmes as well as the idea of unfettered truth by selecting 'Al-Jazeera'. The process of democratising the region may therefore have had its roots back in 1996 in Qatar in the guise of an Arab leaning station.