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WHEN Osama bin Laden organised a wedding for his eldest son in January 2001, he didn't need a home video camera. Instead, he called in a crew from Al-Jazeera, the satellite-television network owned by the Emir of Qatar. The choice was not random. The network had been the only one to broadcast the messages of bin Laden and his associates in full, unedited, and without critical analysis. The wedding was a family affair with Osama's mother, his three wives, his 13 children and his two brothers coming together for what may well have been the last time. Al-Jazeera broadcast the tape of the occasion repeatedly, without mentioning that bin Laden was a fugitive terrorist with a \$5 million bounty on his head. Does this mean that Al-Jazeera is a platform for bin Laden and other terrorists? Hugh Miles's answer in his passionate defence of Al-Jazeera is a qualified no.

Although the closest thing to an authorised biography of the network, Miles's book does not degenerate into one of those hagiographies that Arab despots commission in the West. Still, the author, a British journalist, finds it necessary to insist that he "never received any payment from Al-Jazeera in connection with this book". Miles sees the advent of Al-Jazeera as part of the reforms launched by Sheikh Hamad Al Thani, who deposed his father to become Emir in 1995. He devotes a chapter to these reforms and is carried away by enthusiasm. For example, he sees Qatar as a democracy because it has held a municipal election. But while there is no democracy without elections, one may well have elections without democracy. Why did the emir spend \$137 million to launch Al-Jazeera, and why has he bankrolled it with millions more since its creation in 1996? Miles offers several answers: the emir wanted his state, the smallest in the Arab world, to get noticed; having suffered years of humiliation by the Saudi Big Brother, he wanted to wave the red rag of media freedom at the Saudis. But there was, perhaps, a more important reason. Having allowed the US to build its biggest military base in the Middle East in Qatar - a move bound to provoke Islamist rage - the emir needed a gesture in the opposite direction. Creating a television channel that specialised in vilifying the United States was a balancing act. There is little doubt that Al-Jazeera has put Qatar on the map in a big way. The network has become a thorn in the side of the Saudis. It has kicked the issue of the US military presence in Qatar into the long grass. And, last but not least, it has bought Qatar protection from Islamist terrorists. Qatar is the only one of the 22 Arab League states not to have suffered from Islamist terrorist attacks in the past six years. Miles's mistake is to treat Al-Jazeera as a news medium - which it is not in any normal sense of the term. Al-Jazeera covers only aspects of news, focusing mainly on the Palestinian issue and, in the last three years, on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even then it concentrates on the most violent aspects of those stories, such as car bombs and suicide attacks. Its scoops come in the form of video- and audio-tapes sent to it by terrorists from all over the region - without any apparent effort by its reporters. Al-Jazeera is like an Arab tea-house on air. Its main features are several talk shows, similar to each other but bearing different titles, plus a monologue by an Egyptian cleric in which he invites Muslims to turn their children into human bombs against Christians and Jews. (Miles describes this Egyptian as a moderate because he devoted one programme to proving that fellatio was sanctioned by the Koran.) The talk shows are dominated by some two dozen guests, mostly with Islamist, Ba'athist, and pan-Arabist back-grounds, just like Al-Jazeera's staff. Moderates, liberals and democrats, who do exist throughout the Arab world, are almost never invited. Miles admits that Al-Jazeera may have been infiltrated by al-Qa'eda "at the highest level". Al-Jazeera's star reporter is awaiting trial in Spain on charges of terrorism. Miles also recalls the

dismissal of Al-Jazeera's managing director after revelations concerning his links with Saddam Hussein's regime. The network has also dismissed several other re-porters and managers with alleged links to extremists. Ultimately, however, the reason for Al-Jazeera's success is simple: it rubs the Arab fur in the right direction, confirming Arab prejudices and misconceptions. It tells Arabs that they are innocent victims of a plot hatched by Jews and Christians, and that their poverty, lack of freedom and weakness are not their own fault in any way.

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