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Which do you trust less: Al-Jazeera or Fox News?

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Al-Jazeera:

How Arab TV News Challenged

the World

By Hugh Miles

Abacus, 438 pages \$25

The most riveting journalistic scoop of recent years happened on Oct. 7, 2001, when the first Tomahawk missiles landed in Kabul and the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan began. There was only one television camera in the Taliban-controlled capital, and it belonged to Al-Jazeera, then an Arab satellite news channel that was little known in the West.

For three weeks, reporter Taysir Alluni broadcast live from the corrugated-iron roof of his office, and he had the story of a lifetime and the pictures all to himself. Although the White House asked U.S. networks to ignore the feed offered by Al-Jazeera, it was too good to pass up. Millions saw coalition missiles falling on defenceless Afghanistan, and once saw the courageous Alluni looking frantically for his cameraman, who had been blown off the roof.

It's almost unheard-of in the Internet age for any news organization to have such a clear beat. Chronicling the way Al-Jazeera used courageous journalism to build itself into perhaps the world's largest and most popular television news network would be story enough. But Hugh Miles has crafted a better one here: a careful journalistic examination of who's right, the governments who claim Al-Jazeera is an agent of terrorists or the great mass of Arab and other viewers who think Al-Jazeera is the most accurate news organization in the world.

Miles, an award-winning British journalist, reaches a measured but believable conclusion. Al-Jazeera has given sympathetic coverage to Palestinians, Iraqis and Afghans, but it "is probably less biased than any of the mainstream American news networks," and covered the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq better than anyone.

Miles's scrupulously reported history of Al-Jazeera should change many minds in the West, where the network has been accused at various times of being pro-Iraqi, pro-Israeli, militant Islamist, pro-Palestinian, anti-Semitic, an agent of al-Qaeda, a political tool of the Emir of Qatar (who set it up and underwrites its losses) or under the secret control of the White House.

"The contradictory nature of the complaints," Miles

says, "showed there could be no substance to the allegations of bias."

Among the people who should read this book are members of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, which last year put unprecedented limits on the broadcast of Al-Jazeera's signal in Canada. Before it can be carried on satellite or cable, the distributor must monitor its content and delete "any abusive comments." This will effectively keep Al-Jazeera off the air in Canada.

Elsewhere, it's freely available. Al-Jazeera, launched in 1996 with the slogan "The opinion and the other opinion," now has news bureaus around the world and 40 million viewers, more than CNN.

Miles makes many unflattering comparisons between the principled journalistic decisions made by Al-Jazeera and the uncritical jingoism of the U.S. networks. No Al-Jazeera anchor would do what Fox network anchors did and wear Old Glory lapel pins on air. No Al-Jazeera executive would censor content at the request of a government, as Fox owner Rupert Murdoch did when he said, "We'll do whatever is our patriotic duty."

Al-Jazeera incurred the wrath of the White House five days after 9/11 when it aired a statement from Osama bin Laden saying, "I have not carried out this act, which appears to have been carried out by individuals with their own motivation." That, and the fact that Al-Jazeera's television crews were often in a position directly to contradict Pentagon claims about civilian casualties, led to what Miles feels has been a long trail of official and unofficial intimidation against the network that should alarm us.

Alluni was chased out of Afghanistan when Al-Jazeera's bureau in a residential area was blown up by a U.S. missile. The White House later admitted the attack was deliberate. The network's bureau in Baghdad was destroyed in a similar way, killing a journalist, shortly after it had reported its exact coordinates to the U.S. military so that wouldn't happen. The United States has never investigated that incident, even though Reporters Without Borders concluded that the attack was deliberate.

And what of Alluni, the courageous journalist who scooped the world in Afghanistan and played a key role in his network's outstanding coverage of Iraq? Instead of winning journalistic acclaim, the father of five has been in jail in Spain since 2003, held on suspicion of being a member of al-Qaeda. Miles says if the charges ever come to court and are proved true, Al-Jazeera will be permanently compromised. But he

says the only evidence of any link seems to be that Alluni once got an exclusive interview with bin Laden, which Al-Jazeera aired.

Miles argues that the U.S. harassment of Al-Jazeera is racist and does a disservice to Americans, many of whom still believe Saddam Hussein helped plan 9/11 and that the invasion of Iraq was part of the war on terror. "Nobody in any other part of the world thought like this," he says.

He places the blame squarely on the drift toward celebrity journalism and the decline in reporting on world affairs. "Devoid of history, analysis or intelligent comment, the American public naturally has no idea about riddles like Iraq or Palestine, and so it is no wonder that Al-Jazeera looks like the bearer of bad news."

He quotes an Al-Jazeera executive with an even better explanation. The problem has always been Al-Jazeera's habit of broadcasting the news without first trying to ask the Americans.

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