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AL-JAZEERA AIMING FOR NEW IMAGE

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DOHA, Qatar -- Al-Jazeera, the Arab satellite-TV network best known in the United States for broadcasting Osama bin Laden's videotapes, is starting a children's channel.

The network is reaching to transform itself from a bad-boy upstart that's enraged both Arab governments and Washington to an international media presence on a par with the British Broadcasting Corp. and CNN.

The most ambitious project, al-Jazeera International, a global English-language channel, is supposed to begin broadcasting before year's end.

"We are increasingly a global brand name," said Jihad Ballout, the network's smooth-talking, blue jeans-wearing official spokesman, sitting in the modified trailer that serves as his office.

Across the way, in al-Jazeera's crowded and surprisingly small headquarters building, workers on scaffolding are constructing a spacious new newsroom and TV studio.

But the station still has a slightly scruffy, disorganized feel. And staff members acknowledge that the November launch date for al-Jazeera International could slip.

Whether al-Jazeera, begun in 1996, can make the leap beyond its regional roots remains to be seen.

"The launch of this new channel is a gamble," said Hugh Miles, a British freelance journalist whose book, "Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West," was published earlier this year.

The station has angered the Bush administration with its Iraq war coverage focused on Iraqi civilian casualties, which at times seemed to glorify the violent insurgency. The U.S. government has veered between pressuring its owner, the emir of Qatar, to rein it in and offering interviews with top officials -- including President Bush -- to counter its perceived bias.

Al-Jazeera reporters are banned from Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Yet some U.S. officials also give al-Jazeera "silent credit," as one put it, for its extensive coverage of mass protests in Lebanon and recent elections in Muslim countries, footage seen throughout the Arab world.

Bush says that promoting Middle East democracy is his foreign-policy priority. And al-Jazeera has taken on topics that the region's ossified state-owned television stations never would, including social issues such as premarital sex and the role of women in society. Al-Jazeera also was the first Arab news station to interview Israeli officials. All this was too much for some viewers.

Said Ballout: "We were declared to be on the one hand bin Laden's mouthpiece and on the other hand a CIA creation."

The challenges are financial as well as political.

Despised by many Arab regimes even more than by Washington, the network is boycotted by the Saudis, the region's economic powerhouse. It was supposed to be self-sustaining by 2002, but it continues to lose money and is subsidized by the Qatari leadership.

There's been speculation about privatization. An international consulting firm is studying the feasibility of that step.

It won't happen unless it includes protection for the network's jealously guarded reputation for independence from government control, the station's journalists said.

For employees, the key thing is "the editorial line, the independence is not going to be affected," said editor-in-chief Ahmed Sheikh, a BBC-trained reporter who's been with al-Jazeera from the first day.

The Bush administration doesn't see privatization as an improvement, since it would eliminate the only pressure point -- Qatar's rulers -- that Washington has over the station, said the U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Not that it's much of a pressure point.

When then-Secretary of State Colin Powell met Qatari Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabr al-Thani and urged him to clamp down on the network, the Qatari reportedly responded: "I'll make you a deal: You rein in 'The O'Reilly Factor' and I'll rein in al-Jazeera." He referred to a program on Fox News, widely regarded in this region as anti-Arab and a tool of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

Miles, the author, said he doubted that privatization would occur.

It's "like trying to persuade the Swiss to give up their banks. It's (the emir's) baby. He loves it," Miles said. Promises to study the issue are merely a way for Qatar to deflect U.S. pressure, he added.

Al-Jazeera claims an audience of roughly 40 million and as much as 75 percent of the Arabic-language satellite-TV network in some countries. That's far ahead of the Dubai-based al-Arabiya and the U.S. government-owned al-Hurra station.

Al-Jazeera Live, a sort of Arabic version of C-SPAN, is being launched this month, and a

documentary channel is in the works.

Miles said the network, which became known for its coverage of Afghanistan and Iraq, had mellowed, at least a bit. Debate shows used to be little more than shouting matches, and telephone callers spouting Arab conspiracy theories -- such as one claiming that no Jews died in the 9/11 attacks -- were allowed to ramble. No more.

Al-Jazeera has had to adjust to its own growing audience and global reputation.

"They realize now that they are absolutely scrutinized," Miles said.

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