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But will it play in Peoria? Al-Jazeera faces hurdles, criticism in launch of English network in U.S.

By DAVID BAUDER. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The English-language Al-Jazeera International TV network faces enough hurdles to make Edwin Moses tremble.

It has missed its target launch date and won't set another, has no public commitments by anyone to show it in the United States, saw its closest competitor beat it to the market and is the target of a pressure campaign by a group hoping it never airs here.

Al-Jazeera International's operators are nonetheless pressing forward with plans to create a worldwide news operation, despite a name that immediately raises hackles in the West. "Give us a fair crack of the whip," urges Lindsey Oliver, the network's commercial director.

Four worldwide offices

Al-Jazeera International has the same Qatar-based ownership as the Arabic channel, but its backers insist it's a completely different operation. The new network promises serious newscasts that reflect the perspectives of its four offices: in Doha, Qatar; London; Washington; and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Its most prominent U.S. hire, former ABC newsman Dave Marash, said AJI wants to do the kind of reporting that he did on "Nightline" with Ted Koppel. Well-known British broadcaster David Frost has also signed on.

Marash will anchor the four-hour Washington portion of Al-Jazeera International's broadcast day. He's familiarizing himself with the priorities of a non-U.S. based news organization, which means more stories about Latin America and Canada, and a concentration on environmental, human-rights and workplace-rights issues.

He's even done some reporting, including a trip to New Orleans to look into the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"There's been a lot of planning," he said, "but also, frankly, a lot of wheel-spinning as we await the construction of our new home."

Building four broadcast centers and linking them electronically has proven more complex

and time-consuming than expected and is the reason Al-Jazeera International missed its planned debut in late May, Oliver said.

The embarrassment of missing that deadline is why Oliver refuses to give another target date. Launching during the slow, hot summer months makes little sense, she said. It will happen this year, she said.

The network claims it will initially be available in 40 million homes worldwide. However, not a single cable or satellite operator in the United States has agreed to show it. Even the Dish Network, the only U.S. system to carry the Al-Jazeera Arabic network, has not committed.

At a time when the United States is fighting wars in two Islamic countries - Afghanistan and Iraq - the Arab-owned media company has faced suspicion and outright hostility. The Bush administration has accused the main Al-Jazeera network of inaccurate and biased reporting on news stories in the Middle East.

Certainly there was skepticism during initial talks with carriers, but once Al-Jazeera International explained what it was trying to do, "the fears have been allayed and we've really gotten down to talking business," Oliver said. Unfortunately, "it really just does take a long time to do a deal in the U.S."

Meanwhile, the BBC World Channel - one of the leading worldwide TV news channels, along with CNN - came to the U.S. market for the first time last month when it began airing on Cablevision.

Foes of Al-Jazeera

The conservative watchdog Accuracy in Media last month began an anti-Al-Jazeera campaign with release of a DVD that details supposed ties between the network, al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein's regime. It shows suspected Iraq insurgents saying they wanted to fight America after watching Al-Jazeera.

"We hope to keep Al-Jazeera International out of the U.S. media market and we hope cable providers and satellite providers will have second thoughts about even considering adding Al-Jazeera International to their lineups," said Cliff Kincaid, AIM's editor.

Oliver urged critics to watch, and not prejudge, the network, which she said has hired talented, experienced people.

"I don't suppose that David Frost has ever been accused of being a terrorist before," she said.

Marash got a quick lesson in the volatility regarding his new employer when he received seven invitations to appear on Fox News Channel in the 72 hours after his hiring had been announced. He's received some double-takes when he cites his affiliation while out reporting, but people "are more curious than hostile," he said.

"The Al-Jazeera brand name is controversial in the United States," he said. "Everywhere else in the world it is recognized as one of the most credible brand names." Marash envisions the typical AJI viewer as someone who reads The Wall Street Journal and The

New York Times every day.

But there's a hard road ahead.

"I think the new channel is going to have a lot of problems," said Hugh Miles, author of "Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Challenged the West." "They clearly already have a lot of problems because they've been delayed. It will have a painful start and a painful first year because what they are trying is unprecedented. Every little mistake is going to be seized upon."

WGBH Photo - David Frost, above, and 2) Newsday Photo/Bruce Gilbert - Dave Marash have joined Al-Jazeera International.

