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Al Jazeera aims to go global - in English ; The Arabic news channel is working hard to earn credibility among English speakers.

James Brandon Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Five years after Al Jazeera shot to public attention during the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Arab broadcaster is preparing to make more waves this spring when it launches a new channel - this time in English.

"A lot of people ask me if we're aiming at English-speaking Muslims," says Steve Clark, the new channel's director of news. "But we actually want to appeal to the whole English-speaking world and those who speak English as a second language."

The new channel, called Al Jazeera International, will begin broadcasting in late spring, offering a mix of hourly news bulletins and longer reports, bankrolled, like the original station, by the emir of the Persian Gulf state of Qatar.

The channel's mainly Western journalists promise to challenge existing stations such as CNN or BBC World.

"I'd like to put more emphasis on the developing world," says Mr. Clark. "For instance I'd like to show that there's more to Africa than war and famine."

But while Al Jazeera promises more news from places like Africa and South America than existing channels, reporting from the Middle East will comprise the core of its coverage from its headquarters in Qatar's capital, Doha.

However the appeal of Al Jazeera International will probably be less about the stories it covers and more about how it reports them.

Some hope the channel will provide global news from the perspective of the "Global South," while others fear that the channel's Arab Muslim backer, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifah al-Thani, the ruler of Qatar, may use it to stir up anti-Western sentiment or even to overtly proselytize.

The fact that Sheikh al-Thani is widely seen as a modest reformer within the Middle East doesn't allay concerns among some in the West.

Organizations like the United American Committee, a self-described "movement to promote citizen involvement in national security issues, and to awake Washington on the issue of Islamic extremism," are organizing demonstrations against the new channel's

Washington bureau.

"The reputation can be a double-edged sword in some parts of the world," admits Clark.

"Many politicians have criticized Al Jazeera without understanding it."

But while Al Jazeera's prominent critics, like US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, have accused the Arabic channel of being little more than a mouthpiece for Al Qaeda, the channel's non-Western outlook guarantees it instant popularity in many parts of the world. In Pakistan, for instance, media analysts say Al Jazeera's reputation will assure it a wide audience.

"Al Jazeera [Arabic] already has credibility, even if it's not in a language that's understood in Pakistan," says Agha Nasir, an executive director of Geo TV, an Urdu-language private broadcaster in Pakistan. "I'm quite sure it will be watched."

And just as the original channel has been heralded by some as a force for democracy and reform in the Middle East, Mr. Nasir says that competition from Al Jazeera may accelerate innovation among Pakistani broadcasters.

"We try to be the first with breaking news," Nasir says. "But Al Jazeera will affect us because it's coming from an Islamic country, not like BBC or CNN."

Initially Al Jazeera may be less concerned with dramatic scoops. Instead its priority will be to prove that, despite being funded by an Arab dictator, it is a reliable and impartial broadcaster.

"The new channel will strive incredibly hard to prove its credibility," says Hugh Miles, author of 'Al Jazeera: how Arab TV news challenged the world.' "The first year will probably be something of a test period. They'll see what works and then play to that."

In the quest for credibility the channel has signed up well-known presenters such as Riz Khan, formerly of CNN, and veteran British broadcaster Sir David Frost - who has interviewed the last seven US presidents for the BBC.

For younger journalists, Al Jazeera International offers a unique chance to radically reinvent television news. Its employees predict its impact will compare to CNN's live broadcasts from Baghdad during the 1991 Gulf War.

"It's young and vibrant and zippy and there's no sense of the malaise that affects other larger news organizations," says one BBC journalist who is joining the new channel.

"Before I joined it felt like a big risk but there's actually not a lot of money being thrown about and I've not discerned any possible Qatari influence in terms of the channel's politics."

Some media analysts predict that the channel may increasingly aim at English-speakers in economically booming China and India or the nine-tenths of the Muslim world who do not speak Arabic as a first language.

Media executives in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, say that the English service will definitely make a splash there.

"I'm sure there's going to be a huge following of Al Jazeera [International]," says Endy

Bayuni, editor of the Jakarta Post, an English-language daily in Indonesia.

"Not that we will believe everything it says, but it's a different way of presenting the news to the public," he says. "The more sources we get, the more we find out about the truth."

* Simon Montlake in Bangkok provided additional reporting. (c) Copyright 2006. The Christian Science Monitor

