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Move to privatise Al-Jazeera

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Offended Arab countries bring pressure on Qatar Government

The Gulf state of Qatar is considering privatising its satellite TV channel, Al-Jazeera, because of pressure from the U.S. and a de facto advertising boycott by Arab countries offended by its critical coverage.

Reporters at the station fear that if the channel is privatised commercial pressures could force it to tone down its coverage.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of politics has embroiled Qatar in disputes with almost all of its neighbours, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Few advertisers

According to Wadah Khanfar, the station's director, the consultancy firm Ernst and Young has been hired to look into possible privatisation models, though he said no final decision had yet been taken.

Reporters fear that the power of advertisers and shareholders could lead to self-censorship if the channel is privatised. Because of its taboo-breaking coverage, Al-Jazeera has an audience of some 35-40 million but attracts few advertisers.

Saudi Arabia leads the de facto advert boycott, which Al-Jazeera's head of business news, Ahmed Abdul Mohsen al-Qady, described as "the only thing the Arab Information Ministers can all agree on".

In the absence of ad revenues, a Government subsidy keeps the station afloat. Hans Wechsel, regional director of the U.S. State Department's West Asia's partnership initiative, said: "We have issues with them giving a platform to people who are calling for violence. It's not a matter of Government interference, it's strictly an issue of ethics. After all, we raise ethical concerns with journalists in the U.S. too."

In a region where there is intense anti-U.S. sentiment, a private-sector Al-Jazeera could more critical of the superpower.

"Impartial coverage"

At present, the station invites U.S. officials to put forward their point of view. Hugh Miles, the author of "Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged The World," said: "They have

shown five hours of bin Laden's speeches in total — and 500 hours of Bush."

