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**Media: BBC enters a crowded marketplace as it unveils new Arabic TV channel: With al-Jazeera and others already in the field, has the corporation left it too late?**

Owen Gibson Media correspondent

As they shuffle their scripts a week today the presenters of BBC Arabic's flagship evening news show, Hassad al-Yom al-Ikhbari, will have more than just the fate of yet another Middle Eastern news channel in their hands.

Hoping a reputation earned over 70 years of radio broadcasting in the region will translate to millions of viewers, the BBC World Service is relying on a controversial new satellite channel to re-establish its pre-eminence in one of the world's most competitive news markets.

As it promised to take on al-Jazeera and its rivals head-on, BBC Arabic faced accusations that it was little more than a British foreign policy tool and doubts over whether it could establish itself in an overcrowded sector.

Over a decade after its first attempt to launch an Arabic news channel foundered, BBC World Service director Nigel Chapman unveiled plans to broadcast 12 hours a day, upgrading to a full 24/7 service by the summer.

"Whenever we do independent audience research what's really striking is how highly-rated the BBC is for independence after 70 years of broadcasting in Arabic and also how people can differentiate very precisely between what the BBC does and what the UK government does with its foreign policy or any other objectives," he said.

The World Service claims to have proved over 75 years that while the Foreign Office has a say over where its money is directed, it has no influence over its content.

Paid for by British taxpayers, the pounds 25m a year service marks a big strategic shift. It is the first in a series of World Service TV channels expected to launch in the next few years as it continues to adapt to changing media consumption habits. Later this year it will launch BBC Persian, broadcasting in Farsi.

If the first Gulf war in 1991 marked a seismic shift in 24-hour television news with the arrival of CNN, and the 2003 war in Iraq was characterised by the influential rise of al-Jazeera, the

global news battle is now entering a new phase.

As the World Service is launching TV channels and investing in broadband-enabled websites, al-Jazeera is simultaneously striving to make a success of its global English language service.

Competing with BBC World and CNN International, it has been dogged by rumours of internal strife but claims to have established a loyal following since it launched in November 2006.

Some believe the BBC has come too late to the party in the Middle East and will struggle to make inroads against its well-resourced rivals, which also include the Saudi-backed al-Arabiya.

Its first attempt, a commercial joint venture with Orbit, collapsed in 1996 after the BBC broadcast an episode of Panorama critical of the Saudi royal family. Many of those involved went on to launch al-Jazeera, bankrolled by the emir of Qatar.

"It's not like the first time around when the BBC had an open market. Then there was no al-Jazeera and the BBC had an untarnished reputation," said Hugh Miles, author of *Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World*. "It's a very crowded marketplace. There is a limited pool of talented journalists and the BBC hasn't got the deepest pockets. You wonder whether the BBC will end up finding and training Arab talent, only for them to walk out of the door to rivals."

In all more than 500 channels are available via satellite in the area and rivals say the BBC's commitment to sober impartiality could prove a handicap as much as a strength as it strives to get noticed. Editors will have to walk a tightrope, balancing sensitivities on the ground while judging possible damage to the corporation's reputation abroad.

"I don't think we've missed the train," said Chapman. He pointed to research showing 80% to 90% of viewers were "very likely" or "fairly likely" to tune in, and insisted Britain's involvement in Iraq had not damaged the BBC's standing in the area. He set a target of 20 million viewers within five years.

Plans for BBC Arabic were announced in 2005, when 10 radio stations - mostly in eastern Europe - were closed to help pay for the extra investment required. Since then the government has agreed to boost World Service funding to pounds 252m a year. Anchored from London and Cairo, it will draw on the corporation's network of more than 250 correspondents in 72 bureaux around the world. It will also have journalists throughout Europe, Canada, China and the US.

From the futuristic open-plan studios to the sharp suits worn by male and female anchors, the tone and visual grammar of the channel will be instantly recognisable to 24-hour news junkies.

Bulletins every half hour will be complemented by two editions of Newshour, an in-depth news analysis programme, at 6pm and 8pm.

The BBC has been signing up talent from rival broadcasters and reallocating its own staff

for the past two years. Veteran broadcaster Hasan Muawad will take the inquisitor's chair for weekly show *Fi as-Sameem*, or *To the Point*, Hosam El Sakkari, head of BBC Arabic, will present a live weekly multimedia debate, while *Open Agenda* will explore a single issue in depth.

On potentially controversial decisions such as the screening of videos from al-Qaida, or footage of deceased British soldiers, Chapman said it would follow "exactly the same editorial values as any other part of the BBC".

He said he was reserving judgment on recent moves by the Arab League to draw up a new code of conduct for the media. He promised the channel would be "careful about religious sensitivities and cultural sensitivities without using that as a way of watering down the BBC's determination to do strong journalism which is fair to all parties".

Global reach

BBC Arabic will go out via satellite. Below (left to right), presenters Osman Ayfarah, Fida Bassil, Lina Musharbash and Tony El-Khoury

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