

Is Al-Jazeera ready for prime time | Salon.com

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The "Fox News of the Arab world" plans to take on Rupert Murdoch and friends with a new English-language service -- unless the Bush administration succeeds in squashing it.

| It is fitting, somehow, that Al-Jazeera, the satellite channel most Americans believe speaks for the most militant part of the Arab world, and that the Bush administration has been gunning for ever since 9/11, owes its success to a French porn movie. Back in 1997, a year after the channel's launch, would-be viewers in the Middle East required an expensive, 6-foot dish to pick up Al-Jazeera's signal. To reach more viewers, Al-Jazeera needed a change of frequency, but for that, it required a slot on a Saudi-controlled satellite, which happened to be occupied by the French network Canal France International.

It would take a miracle, or an enormous sum, for Al-Jazeera to land the necessary space. Then, one summer day, a CFI technician flipped the wrong switch -- or so the story goes -- and pumped 30 minutes of "Club Privé au Portugal" into millions of Arab homes. The House of Saud, apparently more fearful of hardcore porn than news and current affairs, booted CFI from the "Arabsat" and signed a deal with Al-Jazeera, greatly expanding its audience and its fortunes. Since then, Al-Jazeera -- based in Qatar, a country with a population smaller than some Manhattan neighborhoods -- has become the media powerhouse of the Arab world, a scrappy independent-minded news outlet in a region where media has long served the Arab ruling elite, not questioned them. It has made powerful enemies in every Middle Eastern government (excepting, as critics point out, Qatar), as shown this week when its Tehran, Iran, bureau was closed for reporting on -- or, as Iran's theocrats charge, inciting -- ethnic riots near the Iraqi border. The network's approach to the news has not made it a lot of friends in the halls of the American government, either. Despite this, or because of it, Al-Jazeera now claims tens of millions of viewers.

And if all goes according to plan, the channel's massive audience will soon expand beyond the Arabian peninsula (its name means, literally, "the Peninsula"). By the end of 2005, Al-Jazeera plans to launch a new international English-language service, to be called Al-Jazeera International. Westerners may still debate whether Al-Jazeera provides forward-thinking programming or jihadist propaganda, but soon more of them will be able to judge the controversial channel's brand of programming for themselves.

Right now in the States, about 200,000 paying subscribers can watch Al-Jazeera on the Dish Network. If all goes as planned, Al-Jazeera could go the way of the Beatles during their Liverpool days: an already sizable audience, but on its way to being bigger than Jesus. Al-Jazeera International's target audience: Westerners dissatisfied with the mainstream media and intrigued by a news organization that openly attacks the "blatant lies" behind the invasion of Iraq and purports to speak for the world's forgotten billions. Then, of course, there are the Muslims: 6 or 7 million of them in the U.S., only one-quarter Arab. There are many millions more in Southeast Asia and Africa who understand English, but not Arabic -- though their relatively meager incomes aren't as attractive to advertisers.

The biggest snag for Al-Jazeera International is securing distribution. Indeed, it could be a deal-breaker. The English-language channel wants to be as easily accessible as MSNBC or Animal Planet. But this, says J. Max Robins, editor of Broadcasting & Cable, is an uphill battle. "Even networks attached to big media conglomerates have trouble getting distribution," he says. And in this case, such universal business difficulties are compounded by the network's status as a lightning rod. Its best bet, according to Robins, may be to shoot for the emerging broadband market.

Faced as they are with a number of significant unknowns, the leaders of Al-Jazeera International have been advised not to talk to reporters. The management team includes former executives from Hill & Knowlton, CNBC and the BBC. Nigel Parsons, the managing director -- and the only executive who would speak to Salon -- previously worked at the television arm of the Associated Press. He explains the career move thusly: "As a journalist, what more could you ask for? It's a blank sheet of paper and an opportunity to make a difference."

Parsons, who was hired last August, has brought on about 30 staff so far, with 270 more soon to come. Al-Jazeera International will have news centers in Doha, Qatar; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; London and Washington. For the on-air jobs, it wants native English speakers. According to Parsons, a lot of talent from places like ITN, Sky News, the BBC and CNN have applied. "A lot of people are cutting back on foreign news, and journalists are getting discouraged," Parsons said. Al-Jazeera International will be all foreign news.

Though everyone says it will be different from its Arabic parent, no one knows exactly what the editorial content of Al-Jazeera International will look and sound like. The rank and file in Al-Jazeera's current Washington bureau, who plead ignorance when asked about the plans of their new colleagues, even stress its independence. (That independence will not, at least at first, extend to finances -- but Al-Jazeera isn't saying how much seed money it has put into the new venture.) Executives are promising extensive coverage of the developing world, so often neglected on the international airwaves. They also plan to lend a bullhorn to figures on the fringes of the American left, such as Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky.

BBC World Service director Richard Sambrook says that to the extent that Al-Jazeera recasts itself for a global audience, "They will be a very serious competitor. They've got a lot of

resources, they will clearly be trying to make a splash, and they are good at doing that." It is, Sambrook adds, a happy competition: The more communication between the Arab world and the West, the better. "There is a gulf to be bridged," he says.

Al-Jazeera spokesman Jihad Ballout agrees that the English service could do some pluralistic, peacemaking good. He says, though, that the bridge to America from the Persian Gulf might take a few generations to build. "It's difficult, especially in the U.S. of A., to get people to think outside the box, to reach out and find alternative sources of information that complement existing ones." Even more so when it comes from a guy named "Jihad."

The launch of Al-Jazeera's English-language service comes at a pivotal moment in the channel's tortured relationship with longtime foes in the Axis of Evil. Since 9/11 its coverage has been the subject of loud and regular complaints from American officials. In both Kabul, Afghanistan, and Baghdad, Iraq, its offices were hit by American weapons, although the U.S. military insists the incidents were accidental. The U.S. establishment view has been that Al-Jazeera is as much an enemy weapon as a shoulder-fired missile or a money-laundering "charity." A recent story in the New York Times speculated that the Bush administration is trying to kill Al-Jazeera by urging the Arabic channel's patron, the Qatari government, to fully privatize it -- and that Qatar seemed, at long last, ready to cut the cord. The story, based on anonymous sources, may have been a bit overhyped. (Some competitors suspect the recent speculation about its impending privatization may be part of a publicity scheme for Al-Jazeera's English-language service.

Al-Jazeera has long planned to go public, thinking financial independence would further boost its status in the eyes of the wider world. Channel executives are optimistic about prospects for survival without tens of millions of dollars in annual subsidies, and estimate the size of the Arab advertising market at \$500 million. On the other hand, a Congressional Research Service report from July 2003 advised that the U.S. government could kill Al-Jazeera by pushing for its privatization; the report's author, Jeremy M. Sharp, puts the ad market at no more than \$180 million --not enough to support a private news channel. And the Saudis already encourage advertisers to boycott the Qatar-based muckrakers; presumably, they would redouble their efforts if they thought they could finally finish off a newly privatized and financially vulnerable Al-Jazeera.

Some Middle East watchers, like Jon Alterman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, dispute the idea that Qatar would put its media darling in such jeopardy. Why would the Emir cut off a channel that has brought his tiny country international prestige and regional influence? Good question. But nobody ever said the world of international relations made sense. For example, few wonks acknowledge the dissonance caused by America's apparent efforts to simultaneously promote freedom and democracy while muzzling the first independent source of news in the Arab world.

Indeed, the U.S. government is sending mixed signals on how it plans to deal with Al-Jazeera.

While neocons in the military brass still want to eradicate it, perceiving it to be a tool for terrorist propaganda, some prominent administration officials are taking a more conciliatory approach. Karen Hughes, a loyal Bush advisor who advocated buying ad time on Al-Jazeera at the start of the Afghan war, is now in charge of "public diplomacy" at the State Department. Her boss, Condoleezza Rice, says we need to do more listening to the Arab world. These are subtle signals, but significant, and may indicate that some in the Bush administration see Al-Jazeera as potentially useful in improving its image among Arabs and spreading its gospel of "democracy."

If the tone of recent public diplomacy legislation in Congress is any sign, more policymakers are realizing that Al-Jazeera must be worked with, because it won't easily be stifled. In the bill implementing the 9/11 commission's recommendations, Congress asked the executive branch to "more intensively employ existing broadcast media in the Islamic world" -- in other words, to acknowledge Al-Jazeera's influence and play ball with it. When it was introduced, the bill targeted Al-Jazeera with provisions about "combating biased and false foreign media." But when the legislation passed, its language had softened. Perhaps some of Al-Jazeera's critics in the U.S. are realizing that its programming probably has liberalized Arab society more than anything Paul Wolfowitz did at the Pentagon. (Across the pond, Tony Blair's old mouthpiece Alastair Campbell wrote a piece in the Guardian titled "I Was Wrong About Al Jazeera.")

To an extent, Al-Jazeera has forced critics to take it seriously. Around the world, some 30 million to 50 million viewers watch Arabs and Jews, Shiites and Sunnis, liberals and fundamentalists, captives and corpses, all above Al-Jazeera's pointy golden logo. As for the Western media, they have railed against its "anti-American" tilt and willingness to air Osama bin Laden's videotaped messages unabridged. At the same time, though, American and European news organizations have relied heavily on Al-Jazeera's footage and reporting -- especially when the violence is worst in Iraq and Afghanistan -- to fill the gaps in their own coverage, made inevitable by years of cutbacks.

But in the United States, at least, Al-Jazeera's enemies have defined its public image. Bill O'Reilly frequently tells viewers that it is "a terrorist organization." That goes a little beyond the mainstream view, but not far beyond. Obviously, it doesn't help Al-Jazeera's image in the U.S. that one of its top correspondents was, until recently, under house arrest in Spain on charges of belonging to al-Qaida. The reporter, Tayseer Allouni, maintains his innocence, and has not been proven guilty. But when it comes to politics and Middle Eastern affairs, "proof" in the sense of verifiable facts is not always required -- which is why great numbers of Americans believe Saddam Hussein blew up the World Trade Center, while many Arabs aren't sure it happened at all.

So is Al-Jazeera just propaganda? Its programming is difficult to monitor in the States, not least because of the language barrier. Like any round-the-clock network, though, the tone and content varies with the show and the subject matter. Organizations like the oft-cited Middle East Media Research Institute, based in Washington and headed by former Israeli military officer Yigal Carmon, usually translate only the most inflammatory stuff. One could paint a pretty damning

picture of the American press, too, by highlighting Joe Scarborough and ignoring the Atlantic Monthly.

Indeed, voices more moderate than Bill O'Reilly often say Al-Jazeera is the Arab world's Fox News. There's something to that view -- the network's disposition is as much against American "colonialism" and Israeli "apartheid" as Fox News is enthusiastic about "the war on terror." Its talk shows give a platform to some unpalatable ideas: Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a regular talking head on "Religion and Life," heartily endorses Palestinian suicide bombers who fight "the tyrannical Jewish entity." (He did, however, condemn the 9/11 attacks.) But Al-Jazeera also airs a show devoted to women's issues. Considering its audience and how state-controlled Arab media has been in the past, Al-Jazeera is more radically Western than it is fundamentalist.

Al-Jazeera's handling of Israel and Palestine is a recurring complaint from its American critics, who accuse it of being virulently biased against Israel. A common charge is that the channel's correspondents invariably describe suicide bombers as "martyrs." And Al-Jazeera reporters have, by their own admission, used the term -- though they say that where their audience is concerned, describing the dead as a martyr is more an obligatory display of respect than a glorification of murder. (Contrast this with the administration-approved term employed by Fox News, "homicide bombers," which strips the bombers of their only positive trait, bravery.) Regardless, transcripts from the CIA-operated Foreign Broadcast Information Service show that anchors and reporters regularly use "suicide bomber," while guests and sources prefer "martyr." Al-Jazeera spokesman Ballout says that in every case, context matters: "We figure that if somebody dies in the cause of defending his own land then he is a martyr, but if he carries a bomb into Tel Aviv and blows himself up, then he is not a martyr."

It is undeniable that Al-Jazeera has a strong pro-Palestinian tilt. But tilt is relative. An Arab network that didn't advocate for the Palestinians would be taken about as seriously as -- well, as Al Hurra, the region's widely ridiculed American propaganda channel.

Hugh Miles, a British journalist and fluent Arabic speaker, has followed the network closely for several years; he recently published a pro-Jazeera book, "Al Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West." Lately, Miles has noticed that the network is increasingly using the terminology, like "suicide bomber," favored by its American and British counterparts. This has led some Arabs to label Al-Jazeera a tool of the CIA, which the U.S. intelligence community surely gets a kick out of. The station's Western critics also contend that it fosters conspiracy theories. Miles says Al-Jazeera has aired the popular theory that Israel staged 9/11 -- but emphasizes that the theory hasn't been promoted by its journalists. Rather, Miles says, the debates on popular programs like "The Opposite Direction" (modeled on "Crossfire") serve to debunk such rumors.

What really pisses people off, say Al-Jazeera's boosters, is that it covers news that

governments would rather cover up: bomb-mangled bodies in Iraq and Afghanistan, Palestinian homes being bulldozed, Arab government corruption, and so on. And Al-Jazeera, like other Arab news media, pursued allegations of torture by U.S. forces more aggressively than American outlets, which didn't give such stories much play until "60 Minutes II" and the New Yorker ran the infamous pictures from Abu Ghraib.

By some measures, its supporters say, Al-Jazeera offers coverage that's more balanced than U.S. networks. A recent American University survey of correspondents in Iraq found that they felt news was often scrubbed of the horrors they witnessed on the ground. Reporters complained of pressure to self-censor, and of unrealistic demands to produce "good news." A typical anonymous comment: "I think we sanitized the images too much so that people do not see the reality of war."

Incidentally, Al-Jazeera has been banned from Baghdad by the U.S.-appointed governing council. During the invasion, its bureau there was hit by the U.S. military; the resulting death of Baghdad correspondent Tareq Ayoob, chronicled in the documentary "Control Room," has never been explained to the satisfaction of Al-Jazeera staffers, who feel the attack was deliberate. U.S. military spokespeople have no patience for such theories; they maintain that the attack was an unfortunate accident. But it's understandable why Al-Jazeera employees might feel as though they're running around with targets on their backs. The Baghdad bureau had supplied the U.S. military with its coordinates before it was hit with a missile. (During the first stage of the Afghan war, the Kabul bureau also took fire.) Miles says that when Al-Jazeera reporters embedded with American forces in Iraq, they "were told by the Marines that they were the enemy."

Al-Jazeera is at least on better terms with the U.S. than Al Manar, the television organ of Hezbollah. Not that they're comparable, exactly; where Al-Jazeera has adopted Western models of balance (what it calls "the opinion and the other opinion"), Al Manar exists specifically to promote Hezbollah's goals. In September 2001, Al Manar was the source of a story that 4,000 Jews didn't show up for work on 9/11, and, in November 2004, it notoriously broadcast the theory of an "expert" who held that Zionists were spreading AIDS among Arabs. Last year the U.S. State Department added Al Manar to one of its "terrorist" lists, prompting its American distributor to toss the channel faster than a ticking parcel. (Responding to the State Department slap, the moderator of Al Manar's "What Is Next" talk show didn't address any complaints about his employer. Instead, he opened his program with a litany of American atrocities beginning with the annihilation of "the Red Indians" and running through slavery, the bombing of Cambodia, imperialism in Africa, and depleted uranium munitions.)

In contrast, executives of Al-Jazeera's English service had private sessions last month with members of Congress and federal officials -- including State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, who, not long ago, was complaining about the network's pattern of "false and inflammatory reporting." Miles thinks State and the CIA are slowly softening their position on the channel. But, he says, the neocons still believe the network is the voice of terror. "They're

misguided, and struggling to understand why America is so unpopular in the region. Rather than examine their policies, they prefer to blame Al-Jazeera," Miles said.

One can only pass the buck so long, though, until the buck gets tossed back in one's lap. An English-language Al-Jazeera, based in and advocating for the Third World, could threaten the Bush administration's siege strategy in its war with the press. (American newspapers may be getting feistier, but the administration can still count on almost uniformly tame television coverage.) At the very least, it may soon be one more voice on the dial, which Americans can trust, boycott or ignore at their pleasure, and which Dick Cheney may have to flip past while he's tuning in to "Special Report With Brit Hume."

