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Arab Al-Jazeera gets cold shoulder - NEW YORK — The English-language AlJazeera International TV network faces a number of hurdles to getting on the air.

By DAVID BAUDER Associated Press

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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. Al-Jazeera International has the same Qatarbased 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.

Its most prominent US 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-US based news organization, which means more stories about Latin America and Canada, and a concentration on environmental, human-rights and workplacerrights 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 timeconsuming than expected and is the reason why AlJazeera 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 glib answer is to say we'll launch when we're ready," 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 US has agreed to show it. Even the Dish Network, the only US system to carry the Al-Jazeera Arabic network, has not committed to Al-Jazeera International.

At a time the United States is fighting two wars in Islamic countries, the Arab-owned media company has faced suspicion and outright hostility. The Bush administration has accused the main AlJazeera 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, she said, "it really just does take a long time to do a deal in the US"

A limited channel capacity in the United States makes it excruciatingly hard to establish a new network. This also provides a convenient explanation for any cable or satellite system to turn down Al-Jazeera International — something like minority home-seekers who wonder if they're being rejected because there are no apartments available or because of their skin color.

Meanwhile, the BBC World Channel — one of the leading worldwide TV news channels, along with CNN — came to the US market for the first time June 1 when it began airing on a New York-area cable system.

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

"We hope to keep AlJazeera International out of the US 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.

"We believe that nothing but death and destruction will result."

Oliver urged critics to watch, and not prejudice, the network, which she said has hired very 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 around 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. For people who have studied Al-Jazeera and what they do, they're more than a credible news organization. They're an historic event in the Arabic-speaking world."

Marash envisions the typical AJI viewer as someone who reads the Wall Street Journal and New York Times every day.

But there are questions over who will be eager to see it. There's even some suspicion among Arabs: if the international channel had been operating during the Danish cartoon controversy and didn't portray the issue in a way sympathetic to Arabs, it could have hurt the Arabic Al-Jazeera's reputation, said Hugh Miles, author of "Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Challenged the West."

Miles believes there's a potential market worldwide for Al-Jazeera International, since CNN International is seen as conspicuously American and BBC World is hurt by financial pressures.

But there's a hard road ahead.

"I think the new channel is going to have a lot of problems," he said. "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."

