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Al-Arabiya's Ratings Lead Increases ^[1]

The latest monthly television ratings in Saudi Arabia by the independent pollster IPSOS-STAT show al-Arabiya dramatically widening its lead over al-Jazeera as the number one satellite television news outlet for the Middle East.

The United States government's choice to give al-Arabiya an exclusive interview with Donald Rumsfeld could be an effect of the lead increase. At one time, al-Jazeera was the go-to news outlet for Middle Eastern viewers and the U.S. used the popular network as a public diplomacy tool. However, it looks as if both viewers and U.S. officials have found a new favorite.

Audience figures for March 2006 for Saudi Arabia, the Middle East's largest commercial market where approximately 70 percent of its advertising dollars are spent, show al-Arabiya with a 27.3 rating, opening a gap almost double the audience for al-Jazeera, which has a 16.7 rating. Only a year ago, in March 2005, al-Jazeera held an almost 10 point audience rating lead over al-Arabiya (29.5 percent to 20.0 percent), which went on the air only three years ago.

The audience shift began in November 2005, when al-Arabiya, supported indirectly by the Saudis others, bested al-Jazeera by only a fraction of a percentage point in the ratings for the first time ever. But by January this year, al-Arabiya had widened the gap to a more than a 4-point lead over al-Jazeera, and last month, it more than doubled that lead.

Jihad Ali Ballout, al-Arabiya's director of corporate communications, said that the channel's increased popularity has been enhanced by its morning family-oriented show, a run of exclusive interviews and controversial interview topics, such as the role of women.

Some technical information is necessary in understanding the efficacy of the recent television audience polling.

IPSOS-STAT'S ratings select cumulative audience - the number of persons who actually watched a channel for five minutes or more the day before. The poll reflects percentages of the adult population who watch a channel, in this case Saudi Arabia's some 18 million persons.

Because a viewer may have watched a channel more than once on the previous day, and the ratings are cumulative, the percentages for all channels when added together will exceed 100 percent. A poll reflecting actual viewing will differ from other surveys, such as an earlier Zogby poll, which asked respondents to name their favorite channel. And still other polls will reflect viewing over a seven-day period, whose cumulative viewing would of course be higher than those of a single day. Those polls do not normally reflect competitive ratings, are often commissioned by a channel itself.

Monthly polling, and thus trends, is available in Saudi Arabia because of its interest to commercial sponsors. In other Middle Eastern countries, viewer surveys are taken usually only once per year. Even so, in Iraq, the most recent poll showed al-Arabiya leading al-

Jazeera in day-after viewing.

The competitive ranking for al-Jazeera, especially in Saudi Arabia, is important to its planned English all-news channel which may debut this summer, after several delays. The channel is currently seeking commercial sponsorship and distribution from American cable channels. There is a scarcity of available cable channel space in the United States, and only those who can demonstrate that they will attract cable subscribers and increased revenue for distributors will succeed in getting carriage.

In the Middle East, some believe the novelty of al-Jazeera, which was the first to challenge state-run television channel monopolies in the Middle East, is wearing thin. Others believe the channel is at a competitive disadvantage because its news correspondents have been banned from reporting in Saudi Arabia by its government, and cannot fairly compete for local viewers with al-Arabiya's news correspondents who have free reign. Al-Arabiya also has freer access to viewers, who can pick up its signal free-of-charge with existing roof antennas, whereas al-Jazeera's signal comes in via satellite dishes and related equipment, which must be purchased.

But the reality is that the competing channels in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East are but a fraction of the competitive forces al-Jazeera International would be subject to in the United States, with its American idols, well-entrenched broadcast news networks, cable channels, and more than a thousand strong, local television news broadcasts on stations throughout the country.

All this may be why al-Jazeera International continues to delay its American debut month after month.
