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Al Jazeera International, Not Quite Ready for Takeoff [1]

CAIRO - Those new monitors they're installing in Washington briefing rooms will remain dark for a little while longer: Al-Jazeera International (AJI), the English-language cousin to the Bush administration's Qatar-based nemesis, has once more delayed its launch plans.

The channel was originally expected to go live early this year. Then late winter. Then early spring. In March, senior staffers were pretty confident it would be on the air in May. But Nigel Parsons, AJI's British managing director, now says that doesn't look like that's going to happen, either. And the channel has yet to announce any distribution deals with U.S. cable networks.

Parsons, who points out that no firm launch date has ever been set, blames technology. "It is, after all, the most complex project technically ever attempted in TV terms, with the four high definition broadcast centers and fiber links," he told me.

But off-camera politics may also be playing a role.

It may seem paradoxical to most Americans, but staffers and senior news executives at al-Jazeera's Arabic channel are worried the new English offshoot will damage al-Jazeera's reputation.

Al-Jazeera International is a completely separate operation from the Arabic channel -- different staff, different newsroom, different studios. Parsons answers directly to Sheik Hamad bin Thamer al-Thani, the Qatari royal in charge of al-Jazeera's growing family of channels (which now includes sports, children's and documentary channels). He does not report to al-Jazeera managing editor Wadah Khanfar.

Interviews with staffers reveal two core concerns about the new channel. First is the question of credibility. Given the Bush administration's dislike of al-Jazeera, the new English version will be under a microscope, with the station's critics waiting to pounce. The fear among al-Jazeera staffers is that, in its eagerness to make its own mark, the new channel will make journalistic mistakes, which will reflect poorly on the Arabic channel.

Second, al-Jazeera has earned a reputation for defending the Arab cause and standing up to both the U.S. and authoritarian Arab regimes. AJI is unlikely to maintain such a stance. "Many are afraid it will not reflect the honest channel these people have sacrificed for," one staffer told me.

Feeding the disquiet is the fact that Parsons, a British television veteran who has been involved in two other satellite channel startups, talks of bringing a "global" perspective to the news, with studios in London, Doha, Kuala Lumpur and Washington, D.C. each anchoring part of the day. "We're an Arab channel," says one al-Jazeera reporter. "We're supposed to

bring an Arab perspective to the news, not a 'global' perspective."

Back in the fall, Parsons proudly told me that the staff would ultimately be made up of journalists from more than thirty countries. In the months since, the perception has grown in Arab media circles that AJI is simply not interested in hiring more than a few token Arabs. Along with Parsons, the top news and current affairs executives and all the bureau chiefs come from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S. On-air personalities like British talk show host David Frost, CNN's Riz Khan and Dave Marash of ABC News were signed to much fanfare. And while hiring decisions in any business are rarely transparent and sour grapes among those who are turned down is common, some very qualified, English-speaking Arab journalists who applied to the new channel told me they were, essentially, shown the door.

Disquiet boiled over into open anger during an al-Jazeera forum on media freedom in January. At a news conference to showcase the new channel, Parsons was asked about the deaths of al-Jazeera staffers and other Arab journalists at the hands of U.S. troops in Iraq. The British manager replied that they were "regrettable," but stopped short of condemning them or the imprisonment of other al-Jazeera employees in Spain and Guantánamo Bay. Arab staffers were enraged. To them, it smacked of appeasement -- and a sign of things to come.

That same month, word began circulating in the al-Jazeera newsroom that Sheikh Hamad had stepped in and ordered Parsons to regroup, hire more Arabs and ensure the station reflects more of an Arab worldview. It is notable that there has been a sudden flurry of announcements of new Arab hires at AJI, including al Jazeera's Cairo bureau chief, Amr el-Kahky, who shifted over to the English channel despite a previous ban on poaching from the Arabic service. Where staff in Washington had been told there would be a strong emphasis on Latin America in the D.C.-based portion of the broadcast day, AJI this week announced an Arab broadcaster and columnist had joined as Washington-based anchor.

Parsons says there are more announcements of Arabs -- or people of ethnic Arab origin -- to come. "It's not as if we have 'quotas,'" he explains, "but suffice to say that a significant number of on-air presenters are Arabic." He also estimates about half the Doha-based senior editorial staff will consist of ethnic Arabs, and there has been a concerted effort to break down the walls of suspicion between al-Jazeera staff and their English-language siblings, with social events like family cookouts and joint committees to enhance cooperation.

So when will AJI go on the air? Parsons says he's hoping the technicians will finish up in May and hand over the studios so the news staff can start working out the bugs. Meanwhile, around the world, programs are being shot and edited for the day the switch is finally thrown.

As Parsons told me, "We will be judged by what we broadcast, not by when we start."

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