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MEDIA

U.S. Satellite Channel Offers Unfiltered Views From the Middle East

By DEAN E. MURPHY

SAN FRANCISCO, Sept. 14 — On the roof of an office building near the sprawling Presidio park, four satellite dishes scanned the heavens this week for television programming that most Americans never knew existed.

They pulled down transmissions from Iraqi State TV, complete with denunciations of the United States and the threats of war by President Bush. They tapped into Syria Satellite TV, including a broadcast that likened Americans to the terrorists of Sept. 11. They also found a program on Jordan TV that suggested the attack on the Pentagon last year was an elaborate plot of Western intelligence officials.

It was not exactly the daily fare of Middle East coverage found on CNN, Fox News or the big three networks. But that was the whole idea.

"We feel we are telling a counter-narrative to what Americans are bombarded with," said David Michaelis, director of current affairs for WorldLink TV, a nonprofit satellite channel based here that rebroadcasts news programs, with English voice-over, from the Muslim

world for satellite TV subscribers in the United States.

"There are no coded messages from the Middle East," Mr. Michaelis said. "It is very much in your face. These broadcasters are constantly questioning the supremacy of the United States."

Mr. Michaelis, a journalist from Jerusalem, and his colleague, Jamal Dajani, a Palestinian-American producer born in the same city, have been scrutinizing the broadcasts of Middle East countries since last November. They use the material to produce a daily news program for WorldLink called Mosaic. Except for the English translations, the programming is left in its original form, with no introductions or analyses from the San Francisco staff.

Mr. Dajani said the hands-off approach was central to Mosaic's purpose of providing Americans with a different and unfiltered window to the Middle East.

"Since Sept. 11, we have had the story of the victim and the accused," Mr. Dajani said. "Every American is making the link to the Middle East, so it is very relevant to see what they are saying there. We are looking at the attitudes of roughly 280 million

people in 22 countries."

During this past week, the Mosaic program was expanded from its normal half-hour slot to one hour to keep up with the intense news coverage of the Sept. 11 anniversary and President Bush's speech to the United Nations. Still, the images broadcast on Mosaic were nothing like those seen on most American channels.

Little attention was given to the formal remembrances at ground

A chance to see what Mideast audiences watch.

zero. Instead, the programming focused on the fallout — considered largely negative — of the Sept. 11 attacks for Muslims, including those living in the United States.

Al Manar TV in Beirut reported about discrimination against Arab Americans. A segment from Iraqi State TV criticized American media

coverage of the 9/11 commemorations, suggesting it was intended to create fear and panic.

Though much of the programming would be considered anti-American, Mr. Dajani and Mr. Michaelis said that their representative sample of what is being shown in the Middle East invariably included other viewpoints. On Wednesday and Thursday Mosaic presented a report from the Palestine Broadcast Company that opened with the words "No to terrorism." It went on to show interviews with Palestinian children who said they felt the pain of Americans on Sept. 11 because of their own encounters with terrorism at home.

Kim Spencer, president of Link Media Inc., which operates WorldLink TV, said the intention of the programming was not to be antagonistic toward American viewers, but rather to present the Middle East as the people living there see it every day on television. So far, the satellite station has agreements with 13 broadcasters to use their programming, and there are negotiations under way with 3 others.

Except for an occasional requirement that was easy to meet — IRIB TV in Iran made its shows available

on the condition that WorldLink TV did not broadcast pornography — the material comes with no strings attached, Mr. Spencer said.

"In this mix of programming, you see support for Americans in Middle Eastern countries as well," he said. "We all felt the same way — as Americans and people — about what went on last year. We are interested in the root cause and trying to better understand what got us here."

None of WorldLink's programming, including Mosaic, is supported by advertising, so Mr. Spencer and his colleagues need not worry about offending commercial sponsors. The station is financed by viewers' contributions and grants from a variety of foundations. Mosaic has been supported by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The satellite station is available as public service programming in about 18 million households that receive DIRECTV and EchoStar DISH Network. Arrangements are now under way to make a weekly version of Mosaic available to public television stations across the country.

"Our goal is to get these programs seen," Mr. Spencer said.