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Correction Appended

Word on U.S. sent in Arabic; New Mideast magazine aims to dispel myths

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An Arabic-language magazine hitting newsstands in the Middle East this week may be America's newest weapon in the war on terrorism, a White House official said Monday.

Hi magazine, which is subsidized by the U.S. State Department, will be sold in countries across the Middle East --- including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Morocco and Algeria --- for roughly \$2 an issue.

"We're fighting a war of ideas as much as a war on terror," Tucker Eskew, deputy assistant to the president and director of the White House Office of Global Communications, said during a visit to Atlanta.

U.S. officials hope the new monthly magazine, targeted toward 18-to-35-year-olds, will dispel misinformation and misconceptions about the United States by focusing on similarities between American and Middle Eastern cultures with articles about lifestyle, technology and health.

They say it will not be propaganda, but will offer stories, such as one on American college life as seen by Middle Eastern students.

In a speech Monday before the Southern Center for International Studies in Atlanta, Eskew said promoting American ideals and culture around the world is more important than ever as a new governing council takes the helm in Iraq.

Along with the new magazine, Eskew cited plans for an Arabic television network funded by the U.S. government as critical to communicating America's messages to the Middle East.

The Middle East Television Network, he said, will combine the "production values of American news" with topics of interest to the Arab world --- and an alternative to the "incitement of violence" which he said was at times prompted by Al-Jazeera and state-controlled Arabic media.

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"There is a lack of accurate, objective news information on television in the Arab world," said Joan Mower, a spokeswoman for the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the bipartisan government agency that will launch the network. "We really felt that there was a desperate need to present our viewers with accurate information about the world and the United States."

The agency has received nearly half of the \$62 million in federal funding it needs to launch the network, and is hoping to receive additional funds from Congress in time to start up before the end of the year. Programs, which will be broadcast by satellite, will include news, public affairs and children's shows, Mower said, and all of them will be presented in Arabic.

"Most of the people we're trying to reach don't speak English," she said. "We are aiming at a viewership across the gender and age spectrum, people who are not now able to get an accurate perspective of what our country's like."

A poll released by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press last month revealed that support for America around the world has dropped over the last year in the wake of the Bush administration's war on terrorism and U.S.-led military action in Iraq.

"It's not our government's job to be loved, but it is our job to increase understanding," Eskew said.

An executive order from President Bush in January created the White House Office of Global Communications, which Eskew directs, to promote America's image abroad.

"We do a pretty bad job of advertising for ourselves, and we could do a much better job," said Devin Stewart, chairman of Emory University's department of Middle Eastern and South Asian studies. "There are some very good things about this country that we should let people know about."

But Stewart said he is skeptical of the new magazine's ability to effectively convey America's message.

"Disney and Arnold Schwarzenegger probably work better," he said.

"The market is very competitive right now. I think if it's coming from a cultural superiority complex, saying that we are infallible, that our policies are the best, then I think it may be liable to failure," said Rani El-Hajjar, a student at Georgia Tech and the Atlanta coordinator for Palestinian Media Watch.

"If it's objective and balanced, it has a large probability of success," he said.

Tucker Eskew in Old Executive Building.

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CORRECTION: An article in Tuesday's main news section about White House efforts to promote America's image in the Middle East misidentified the organization Palestine Media Watch.

GRAPHIC: Photo: White House aide Tucker Eskew, in Atlanta on Monday, is promoting American ideals and culture around the world.