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## Mid-East's other TV hot-spot

Dubai is not the only broadcasting hub in the region. Jordan's Media City is showing signs of similar dramatic growth, writes **Chris Forrester**

The expansion of channels over the Middle East shows no sign of let-up. Nilesat is carrying 335 TV channels. Overall, the region is supporting more than 370 channels with more than 90% of all TV viewing won by satellite. The growth in the number of channels seems never-ending. The Middle East is a huge single-language market, larger than anything Europe can equal, and local officials see there being no slowdown in overall expansion.

Nilesat has just ordered a new satellite (201) for delivery in 2010. Arabsat is carving out a similar furrow, ordering new satellites to expand its capacity.

There has been a great deal of media attention on Dubai, especially for its entrepreneurial spirit in encouraging new channels to establish themselves in the Emirate. But there's similar growth – although without as much fanfare – in Jordan. While Dubai's expansion is state-supported, Jordan's Media City is more modest in scope and is privately financed (by Saudi billionaire Sheikh Salah Kamal's Dallah company). The concept was much the same as Dubai, the 'if we build it will they come' idea, which has worked with more success in Amman than anyone could have imagined.

In Amman, alongside the grounds of Jordan TV, the Jordan Media City (JMC) just grows and grows. But while Dubai invest billions of dollars, the commitment in JMC is more modest: \$12m last year in a new tower block and

giant uplink dishes, but helping boost revenues for JMC that have grown 20% and 30% over the past two years.

JMC is also helped in having Arab Radio & Television (ART), a Mid-East pay-TV operator, as a key client. ART is owned by Sheikh Salah Kamal. Four years ago ART was almost 100% of JMC's business. Today, while ART's channels have grown in number, the ART proportion of JMC's overall business has fallen back to 40%.

Radi Alkhas is JMC's CEO. "We have six uplinked streams for ArabSat transmitting in total about 76 channels," he says. "Sixteen of these channels are played out by us. Nineteen come into us via internet and the rest are turn-around channels which come into us and are uplinked to ArabSat. We also have a C-Band digital bouquet that's now full, which brings in ArabSat material from Tunis and Spain. We receive it, and uplink it directly to ArabSat."

### Engineering ART

To handle this expansion an impressive new building has just opened. "By and large the new building will be occupied by ART giving them a modern and attractive workplace," says Alkhas. "We also hope that the new building will lead to greater efficiency. Currently ART's channel heads are spread between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and here and now with the new building everyone will come to Jordan. Additionally ART engi-

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neering will be here for all the group's activities. Within this one building we'll have all the different aspects of the business."

"Within ART the largest demand is for ART Sport which is a major production exercise," says Alkhas. "From our studios here we create all the graphics, and that's a massive exercise plus the promotional videos. I can tell you nine live channels of sport is a huge demand and we will shortly be carrying ESPN, adding to the workload. Total staffing for ART as far as we are concerned is about 350 people."

"In addition to the six ArabSat streams there are another six for Nilesat and by the end of this year we will have increased by an additional two for ArabSat, two for AsiaSat, one stream for one of Eutelsat's Hotbird so we anticipate about 16 full transponder streams from here by the end of the year. By year-end it will be close to 200 channels."

Alkhas says the fresh channels are coming from everywhere. "For example, Globecast is now an excellent client and we are looking to secure a further agreement with them to handle international play-

out for Globecast beaming their clients' channel around the world, where hopefully we will be taking the Asian portion. We are also in discussions with Orange here in Jordan about their plans for TV and also to create a fixed fibre link from Jordan through the Mediterranean direct to Paris where Globecast has direct fibre links. It's possible at the moment to do this using FLAG [undersea cable] via Aqaba but it's expensive."

### No HD demand

Alkhas compares and contrasts the difference between Dubai and Amman. "Jordan is different from Dubai. As far as regulation, tax free status, we are ready to compete aggressively with Dubai."

"Dubai, as everyone knows, is all about real estate — high rise apartments and offices and quite spectacular developments. This is not Jordan. We are sophisticated in a different way. We have talented and skilled engineers and technicians willing to work hard, keen to learn and do a good job."

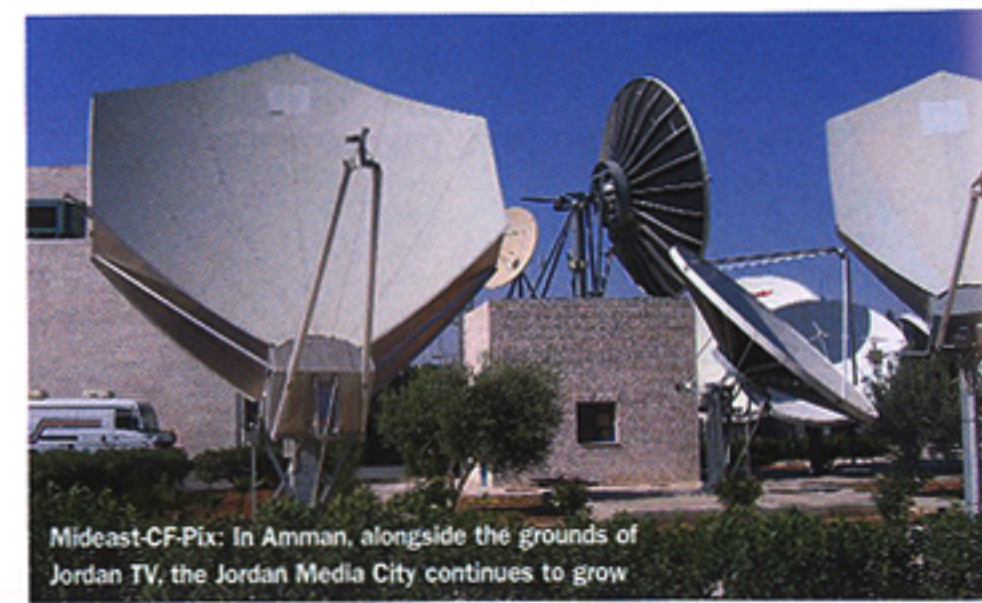
"We have plenty of channels

which have moved from Dubai to us here in Jordan. Dubai is expensive, inflation is rising fast, communications in terms of traffic is a nightmare and people are realising that Amman has a great deal to offer," says Alkhas.

All this is good news. But if there's one element that's negative it is in the region's attitude to HDTV. "I'm sorry to say that there has been no demand for high definition at all. ART experimented with the last World Cup to a handful of homes but there's simply no demand."

"ART bought three HD OB trucks but there are now in Saudi Arabia being used to capture the Saudi League in SD. It is for Sheikh Salah to decide on what happens for 2010. Everyone is buying flat screens of course. I am convinced that HD is coming, and we will follow the rest of the world but it's going to take some major broadcaster to make the jump first. The big free-to-air broadcasters like NBC and LBC, they will wait until there are decoders in the market, not the other way around."

"Big broadcasters like NBC and LBC will wait until there are decoders in the market, not the other way around" – **Radi Alkhas, JMC**



Mideast-CF-Pix: In Amman, alongside the grounds of Jordan TV, the Jordan Media City continues to grow