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Sharq al-Adna: British Covert Radio and the Development of Arab Broadcasting

Sharq al-Adna, or the *Near East Arab Broadcasting Station*, was a covert British-controlled radio station, which broadcast in Arabic for ten hours a day from 1941 until its demise at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956, when it was taken over by the military and became *Sawt Al Britani-The Voice of Britain*, a much-derided attempt by the authorities to counter Egypt's *Radio Cairo* (Franzen 2009).

It was begun by the Special Operations Executive, or SOE in Jenin in Palestine in 1941, later moving to Jaffa, where in 1943 it came under the control of the Political Warfare Executive, (PWE) then Jerusalem in 1947 and finally in 1948 to Cyprus where it continued on the surface as a commercial station but was in reality still controlled by the British intelligence services and funded through a mixture of secret British government subsidy, advertising and oil company money. It had a largely Arab staff, drawn from across the region, with a small number of British officers operating in the background. Throughout its career it had to adapt to the changing nature both of the objectives of its creators and the social and political environment in which it operated at the same time as masking its true identity. Begun in order to counter Italian and German propaganda efforts, the station broadcast a mixture of popular music,

plays, topical discussions and readings from the Koran, alongside news programmes which were attuned to Arab sensibilities at the same time as following a pro-British agenda so subtle as to be near undetectable. This policy continued into the early years of the cold war but finally foundered when tensions with Egypt made this sleight of hand impossible. This article will argue that by its very nature the success or otherwise of the propaganda effort of *Sharq Al-Adna* was at the time, and remains difficult to assess but the choices made by its founders as to content and staffing mean that its most concrete contribution was to the development of Arab broadcasting and the cultural life of the region.

‘Secret’ entities, such as *Sharq al-Adna* are not easy to research and what has been written about the station has been hampered by contemporary obfuscation of governments and their officials, by the rules surrounding the release of state papers and the continuing sensitivity of some aspects of the story. The picture has been getting fuller the further away we are from the events, however. Much of the literature on *Sharq al-Adna*, has concentrated on the climactic events of 1956, for example (Rawnsley 1996) and (Boyd 2003) and less on the station’s early history. *Sharq* has featured more extensively (Vaughan 2005) as part of an assessment of the overall propaganda effort of both the British and the Americans in the region from the end of WW2 to the immediate aftermath of Suez, concentrating on the match, or more accurately mismatch between policy and propaganda. This article is based upon published academic work, government papers as they have been released, the memoirs, published

and unpublished of some of those involved, including, unusually for an article on this subject in English, some material originally published in Arabic¹. In so doing it seeks to go beyond the discussion of purely Western-focused foreign policy objectives and strategies within which the literature on the station is usually framed and looks to make a contribution to the history of culture and the media in the region. This is an area which it has been argued (Armbrust 2012) that is both under-researched in general and has lacunae in what writing there is when it comes, for example to early radio and religion, or entertainment, both of which featured in broadcasting at the time but have been largely ignored by the academy in favour of news. This article then offers, an analysis of the nature of British 'Information work' (as it was called) in the Middle East during WW2 and into the Cold War, highlighting the sometimes-divided loyalties of those involved and offers an insight into the beginnings of broadcasting in the Arab world.

Sharq al-Adna was neither the first nor the only British attempt at broadcasting to the Middle East in the Arabic language in the nineteen thirties. Nor was it the first external broadcaster to the region; this was Italy's *Radio Bari*, which began broadcasting in Arabic in March 1934. Others followed, as European nations began broadcasting 'to their own colonial and mandate outposts' (Stanton 2006). In the case of *Radio Bari*,

¹ For Translations from the Arabic, I am indebted to University of Westminster colleagues Dr Noura Al-Obeidli and Mahmoud Zaki

they also broadcast to the possessions of other colonial powers, to the increasing consternation of their rulers. *Radio Bari* soon became popular in the region, broadcasting to Italian-controlled Libya but also to 'Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine and the Red Sea region'. The Italians supplied cheap sets to aid popularity and by 1935 it was reported *Radio Bari* could be heard in cafes across Palestine, where the clientele 'sipped their coffee and swallowed Italian propaganda with every mouthful' (MacDonald 1977: 195) In response, the British Mandate authorities launched the *Palestine Broadcasting Service* from the end of March 1936, broadcasting in Arabic, Hebrew and English. This was followed by the BBC External Services, which began an Arabic Service in January 1938. Other languages were soon added and by the eve of WW2, the BBC was broadcasting to the Middle East and the Balkans in eight languages including English (Vaughan, 2008). Not to be outdone, the Germans began short wave broadcasts to the Middle East from the autumn of 1939.

Sharq al-Adna was then only one actor in a crowded scene of external broadcasting to the Middle East but unlike the other stations mentioned above, it was a covert operation, which sought to hide who ultimately controlled it in a way that *Radio Bari*, or the broadcasts from Berlin did not. They were broadcast in the Italian and German interest from Italy and Germany respectively.

The SOE, disbanded at the end of the war, was set up by the British in 1940 to conduct sabotage operations principally in enemy-occupied territory. It also had a propaganda arm, SO1, under whose auspices *Sharq* was created. Although it was the mid 1980s before official papers on SOE activities were released, (and some have yet to be made public), the temporary nature of the SOE has allowed numerous of its wartime operatives to write memoirs, which though partial as these things inevitably are have provided detail on the station, its broadcasts and the people who created it. Known by some as the *Baker Street Irregulars*, after the location of their London headquarters and with a nod to Sherlock Holmes.²

Broadcasting was but part of a much wider SOE-controlled propaganda effort. SO1 was headed by Rex Leeper, who was to later to be credited with founding the British Council. In the autumn of 1941, he laid out in a memo his thoughts on news, propaganda and political warfare. The current war was the first where such a technique had been employed he wrote, using the two new communication technologies of the interwar period, radio and talking pictures. 'These two weapons brought politics straight to the masses'.³ The means to be employed were listed in another memo the following April, namely, 'broadcasting; the clandestine

² Location was it seems a common nickname for parts of the British intelligence setup. *Aficionados* of the spy novels of John Le Carre, will be familiar with the 'Circus', or MI6, so named after its location in Cambridge Circus in the West End of London. The secret political vetting of BBC employees by MI5, finally exposed in the mid 1980s, was called 'colleging' by those in on the process, as the papers of employees to be investigated were sent over to Bedford College, that organisation's headquarters until it was bombed by the Germans and had to move elsewhere. The name persisted.

³ TNA FO 954/23/A 'The Meaning of Political Warfare', Rex Leeper 15 October 1941

circulation of printed material; and oral propaganda in the form of rumours'. The broadcasting section comprised two entities, a collection of 'black' radio transmissions in various European languages run from Jerusalem, and *Sharq al-Adna* from Jaffa. Information officers across the region distributed material produced in Cairo and fostered their own networks of contacts. Central to this effort and especially relevant to *Sharq al-Adna* in particular was that it was 'an absolute principle of all propaganda conducted by SOE that it shall not appear to emanate from any British source... For this purpose, SOE propaganda...*must be able, if necessary to differ from the official policy of HMG*'. [my italics] This of course related to the credibility of the material but crucially in the case of *Sharq* it also allowed the British government to distance itself from the broadcast contents where they were politically sensitive. ⁴

Sharq was founded at a time in the summer of 1941 when there were real fears that Cairo might fall to the forces of Germany and Italy, Palestine itself was threatened and in the words of Conservative, MP, SS Hammerley, quoted by John Connell Robertson, (who was to achieve post war fame as an author and broadcaster under the name John Connell, and whose own published memoirs are also a source for this article), 'every Arab in the Middle East thought we [the British] were done for'(Connell 1947: 8-9).

⁴ TNA FO 898/113 SOE Activities 1941-2 Memo, 'Middle East and Balkans. Activities of Directorate of Special Propaganda' from Lord Glenconner 10 April 1942

According to Ewan Butler, who ran the Jerusalem 'black' stations aimed at the Balkans, it occurred to 'some far-sighted planner...' that 'it might be an advantage for us to control a radio station which already enjoyed the confidence and even, perhaps, in some degree, the affection of the Arabs'. Once established, 'if the worst came to the worst' it could be run 'from the Sudan or even Kenya' and used as a vehicle to encourage resistance to the Nazis (Butler 1963: 52).

Personnel and Programmes

The 'far sighted planner', was Air Commodore Kenneth Carron Buss, who 'had served many years in the Middle East: he spoke beautiful Arabic: he knew and loved Arabs' (Connell 1947: 69). He was also a convert to Islam. In Connell's telling, Buss proposed the station to him as something akin to a gift: 'We ought to get a radio station going for the Arabs. *Their* radio station; putting out *their* broadcasts' (Connell 1947: 81). Knowing nothing of broadcasting and but five words of Arabic himself, he was not, however, without resources. In addition to the local knowledge acquired by long-serving officers such as Buss, the SOE had a wide range of talent to draw on, including senior academics from prestigious British universities. One such, orientalist Dr J Hayworth-Dunne, had been given leave of absence from SOAS and tasked to 'cover everything connected with Islam, the Arabic language and subversive movements in Islamic countries directed or organised against Great Britain'. In the spring of 1941 he was responsible for: the production of propaganda pamphlets and the like; the

organisation of societies to spread pro-British thought and the attempted break up of their pro-German and Italian counterparts; and the sending of agents to infiltrate mosques to spread his 'whispers', his term for the rumours mentioned above. He excoriated British efforts at broadcasting, the BBC lacked 'any punch or appeal' whereas the locals loved 'to listen to the vitriolic outpourings' emanating from Berlin, which were of 'unlimited danger' and he thought should either be jammed or listening to them declared illegal.⁵

Personnel for the new station, both British and Arab were chosen with some care—the British, Buss being a case in point, because they had knowledge of and in some cases a demonstrable identification with the region, its people and their culture; the Arabs, *au contraire* often because they had publicly opposed the British presence. Heyworth-Dunne had been referring to the broadcasts of Sheikh Haj Amin Husseini, ex Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, then resident in Berlin. Haj Amin had at one time been favoured by the British authorities early in the Mandate but had eventually been forced to flee to Iraq and from there to Germany. The Middle East, and Palestine in particular looked like fertile ground for Axis propagandists. British responses to the Arab rebellion of 1936-9 were characterised by widespread brutality, (Hughes 2010) the imprisonment of some of the most respected Arab leaders and the suspension and closure of Arab newspapers. The Germans were also, at this stage, winning

⁵ TNA FO 898/113 Propaganda and Intelligence work carried out by Dr J Heyworth-Dunne for the Arab-Moslem area of the middle east command during March-May 1941

militarily – but the station launched on the cusp of change. By the autumn, the Germans were locked into the fight with the Russians, which would prove their undoing. Popular opinion may have been to the contrary but the British were not finished and though Husseini may have been a thorn in their side, even this could be turned to advantage.

When it was suggested that it was essential that the Director of Programmes for the new station should be an Arab, one of the Grand Mufti's relatives, Dr Ishaq Husseini was chosen. He taught at the Arabic College in Jerusalem and had studied journalism in Cairo and literature in SOAS in London, and was to become one of the leading literary figures in Palestine. His credentials then, as to education, pedigree, and politics, both by his family ties with Haj Amin and (Butler 1963) by his own writings, were highly appealing. As Connell put it, 'he was we were mysteriously assured, highly suspect; we checked that, and his record was impeccable' (Connell 1947: 104). Other, similar appointments were to follow. Another politically significant figure, Sheikh Abdul Kadir Al Muzaffar, was to deliver topical commentaries for the station. He had long been regarded by the Mandate authorities as 'a notorious agitator and firebrand' and 'one of the most dangerous men in Palestine' (Ghandour 2010: 133). Muzzafar had been imprisoned several times by the British, during the 'troubles' but at the outbreak of war had volunteered his services to the British and when he heard about *Sharq*, he did the same. It was an offer which was eagerly accepted. Given the objectives of those founding the station the advantage was clear, it was 'a guarantee of the

authentically Arab character of the station. It was surely inconceivable that the British would have ever allowed him on the air' (Butler 1963: 59). One might speculate on what was in it for the Sheikh? To Butler it was a straightforward, pragmatic choice and when Muzaffar had offered his services in 1939 he did it 'on the clear understanding that as soon as the Germans were soundly beaten he would resume his activities against the British. For Sheikh Muzaffar, the matter was simply a choice of evils, and the British were the lesser of two evils' (Butler 1963: 58-59).

Wing Commander Alfred Marsack, (known also as *Shams Al Din Al Hajj*) the station's first director was, like Buss, for whom he had worked, fluent in Arabic, having served in the region in the inter-war years. Like Buss, he too had converted to Islam. He announced the launch of the station in Arabic. *Sharq al-Adna* was to be 'From Arabs to Arabs only, and I'm the only foreigner to work in it. Other than that, the Arab staff manages the radio entirely... We want to reflect Islamic principles and Arabic heritage, and broadcast news, entertainment programmes, and music (Mansour 2017)'.

A great deal of his value to *Sharq* was his deep and intimate engagement with the region and its people. His second in command, Major GE Law in his unpublished memoirs wrote,

he had not confined himself to adopting the faith. With it, he had taken over some distinct tinge of the Arab mentality and way of life. He was genuinely more at ease with Arabs than with his own countrymen—a

fact which makes service under him a trifle disconcerting for an Englishman.⁶

He knew personally many of the leading figures in the Arab world.

Marsack refused to patronise the Jaffa Club, favoured by British officers for food drinks and bathing, because it did not allow Arabs to become members, 'and this ran contrary to all his ideas and predilections' and Law was forced to use the distinctly inferior Arab facilities along with his boss. Politically, Marsack identified with Arab aspirations and shared their opposition to Jewish immigration, which 'he regarded as gross infringements of the rights of the Arabs and the miserable negation of all the promises made to King Faisal and his family'.⁷

By the time Law arrived, *Sharq* was firmly established, with himself and Marsack as the only two British officers involved and with an Arab staff of one hundred and twenty drawn from across the region, some with broadcasting experience on loan from the Egyptian Broadcasting Corporation and 'Sharq al-Adna rapidly got a reputation for slick and effective programmes' (Partner 1988: 53). The station broadcast ten hours a day on a transmitter powerful enough to be heard eventually from Aleppo in the north to Asmara and Khartoum in the south, from Tehran in the east to Cyrenaica and Tripoli in the west. Following the example of *Radio Bari*, the content was mainly entertainment. As well as a large library of Arabic

⁶ IWM Documents 4547, Private Papers Major GE Law, Memoirs Dec 1941-Sept 1943

⁷ IWM Documents 4547, Private Papers Major GE Law, Memoirs Dec 1941-Sept 1943

recordings, *Sharq* had two station orchestras: one, the Near East Radio Ensemble founded by Abdul Karim Bader, maestro of the oud, when he worked on the station in the early nineteen forties. Famous musicians and singers such as Mary Jubran, 'the nightingale of the Lebanon' and Laure George Dakkash were engaged to stay for short periods to perform, as well as the band of the Arab Legion from Amman in Transjordan. In the 1950s, recordings of Fayrouz, perhaps the most famous singer of all, introduced her to the wider Arab public. She and the Rahbani brothers were given a contract in 1953, 'There, the Rahbani brothers had time to experiment and they had a studio and an orchestra' (Burkhalter 2013: 155). Kamel Qustandi, who was eventually to run the station's commercial side after it moved to Cyprus was interviewed in 1998 on his time at the station. He, like many other young Palestinians found employment with the British military, at first in his case as a watchman at a military base but was then recruited to the music section of *Sharq* and from there, having shown a short story he had written to the station manager Muhammed Al Ghussain, he became head of drama. He credits the station with a significant role in the cultural life of the region, popularising the music of such stars as Mohamed Abdel Wahab (who went on to write the national anthems of both Libya and Tunisia) and Egyptian singer Um Kulthum. Recordings made in the 1950s by the station's field team, who travelled the region was later distributed to other radio networks. In this he is in agreement with GE Law, who was of the opinion that, its political significance aside, *Sharq* provided 'an opportunity for spreading

entertainment and education to their peoples on a quite unheard of scale', which to him alone justified its existence.⁸

Sharq personnel went on to work, and in some cases to found radio stations across the region, using knowledge and skills obtained while working at the station. In 1948 EH Paxton of the BBC made a tour of the region, concerned principally with how the BBC was received but he also reported on other broadcasters. He expressed a very low opinion of the professionalism of *Radio Lebanon*, for example comparing it unfavourably with the *Sharq* Beirut operation. '*Radio Damascus*, in sharp contrast...is in charge of an intelligent young man who worked with *Sharq al-Adna* in the early days...was full of bright ideas. He is very keen on educating the masses...'⁹ *Radio Lebanon*, founded in 1936 had been taken over by the Lebanese government in 1946, shortly before Paxton's tour and later one might see the influence of *Sharq* personnel at work in the following, 'In 1950, Halim al-Rumi became director of its music department. Working with similar ideas as *al-Sharq al-Adna*, he offered contracts to musicians and composers. Soon, the radio station had its own orchestra' (Burkhalter 2013: 155). To Nicola Ziada, who worked on the station, *Sharq* 'was a radio broadcasting school', whose employees went on to influence the development of most Arab radio networks. The Zionist-supporting *Palestine Post*, which was not always enamoured of the contents of *Sharq* broadcasts, noted the departure of Marsack for a position with BBC in

⁸ IWM Documents 4547, Private Papers Major GE Law, Memoirs Dec 1941-Sept 1943, p93

⁹ TNA, FO 371/81983 EH Paxton Report on Middle East Tour, November-December 1949, p9

September 1944 saying that 'He supplied the academic and artistic needs of this part of the Arab world by programmes of a wide range'... thus building up 'much goodwill' (Palestine Post 14 September 1944: 4).

It was not all entertainment. Talks on a wide variety of subjects, chosen by the Arab programme directors with little or no interference from the British officers were a regular feature. Azmi Al Nashashibi, from another of Palestine's leading families gave a series of talks in 1941-2, aimed at enhancing Arab-British relations partly based on his own experiences of life as a student in London. The *Palestine Post* announced in the autumn of 1944 that Amina Said, the Egyptian feminist had arrived in Palestine and was to give a series of talks on *Sharq* (30 October 1944: 2). Ziada was anchor 1947-8 of 'Cambridge University Calling the Arabs' interviewing visiting academics from a wide variety of disciplines (Ziada 2003).

From the start, readings from the Koran 'were a vital part of the daily programme'. In Cairo, Heyworth Dunne had advised that one essential for the station was a Koran chanter and they secured at no little expense and difficulty 'the services of the finest, but the finest Koran chanter in Egypt' (Connell 1947: 105). He was flown up to Jenin and the station went on air on the next day, the first of Ramadan 1941 with a long recital of the Koran (Connell 1947: 109). Subsequently, they regularly used three blind chanters, 'considered by the cognoscenti to be to be workmanlike performers', but on special occasions, such as during Ramadan, they

looked further afield. This did not come cheap and Law was astonished when he discovered the amount, £120.00, (roughly £6,500 today) being paid per month to one such from Cairo, 'plus all his hotel, travelling and living expenses'.¹⁰ The station could afford it. Most contributors were no doubt very pleased with the fees on offer but it did arouse the suspicions of some. The station at one point invited Egyptian literary giant Taha Hussein to give a series of talks. EH Paxton, of the BBC, interviewed him some years' later. Hussein was curious as to the precise nature of the station and said, 'The terms offered were so fantastically generous, including first-class travel and accommodation to his family, that he rejected the offer. He thought there must be a catch in it'¹¹.

The catch, was of course in the news programmes. The vast bulk of the output was indeed by, of and for, Arabs. The news was something else. As Palestinian historian Nasri Al Jawzi has written, 'There was a complete and sharp separation between the production of programmes on the one hand and the production of news reports on the other...news reports, which were originally delivered in English and translated into Arabic by two editors, Bassam Azar and Nimer Shehab'.

News came from a variety of sources, from Britain and from local correspondents stationed around the region and 'there was an unwritten agreement that the two Arabic editors would draw the English official's

¹⁰ IWM Documents 4547, Private Papers Major GE Law, Memoirs Dec 1941-Sept 1943, p147

¹¹ TNA, FO 371/81983 EH Paxton Report on Middle East Tour, November-December 1949.

attention to news contents that were considered harmful and offensive [from a political perspective] to broadcast for its Arab audience. This mechanism remained valid until the Suez Canal crisis of 1956...(Al Jawzi Al Maqdisi 2010)'.

To keep knowledge of British involvement in the station to a minimum, the news had to balance British policy and Arab predilections and aspirations. During the war, 'There was plenty of anti-Nazi and antifascist in them, but no waving of the Union Jack'¹² and there were compromises even in countering the opposition; Law wrote that he and one of the Arab staff, Yusuf Bandak, (whose journalist father Issa Bandak had been imprisoned by the British during the 'troubles'), produced a five minute, 'Answering Today's Axis Lies' feature, but Law chose to ignore the Belin broadcasts of Haj Amin,

I thought it unwise, and probably dangerous, to attempt to answer his broadcasts. It seemed to me more prudent, if faint-hearted, to leave them severely alone. How could I venture to challenge a man in debate who was speaking to his own people, in his own tongue, and had been a leading figure in all the controversy of which I knew so little?¹³

¹² IWM Documents 4547, Private Papers Major GE Law, Memoirs Dec 1941-Sept 1943, p91-2

¹³ IWM Documents 4547, Private Papers Major GE Law, Memoirs Dec 1941-Sept 1943, p140

It was not only the desire to minimise the British profile of the station that determined the news agenda: the leeway offered by its covert status and its mission to persuade the Arabs to identify with Britain rather than the Germans and Italians was one factor; the sensibilities of the Arab staff was another. It was tactically wise to place the station in the charge of an officer of proven Arab sympathies (as were his successors,) and a staff of proven rebelliousness. The credibility this afforded the station with the Arab public did come with a price, however. To be an authentically 'Arab' station it had to voice Arab political views and suppress or at least disguise British ones not least because the staff would expect one and not tolerate the other. This was well understood by the British officers working on the station. GE Law, writing of the beginnings of the station accurately predicted the actions of the Arab staff at the end,

As you will see any British slant to the programmes was conspicuous by its absence. And I am quite certain that most of the staff would never have leant themselves to be a mere mouthpiece of British propaganda. They were extremely proud of having their own Arab station and they looked upon it as specifically their own.¹⁴

Changing times, changing role

¹⁴ IWM Documents 4547, Private Papers Major GE Law, Memoirs Dec 1941-Sept 1943, Summary, p2

As the war in Europe ended in 1945, the security situation in Palestine deteriorated and travel around the country became increasingly difficult for British military personnel and Arab staff alike. Early in its career the station had moved from Jenin to better premises in Jaffa but by 1947 Jaffa was no longer safe and *Sharq* being both British and Arab was a target for the Zionist underground and was forced to relocate to the *Bab el Zahiri* quarter of Jerusalem, where it occupied 'a bleak little compound' where the occupants were holed up for weeks on end (Hodgkin 2012: 309).

Operating difficulties informed a review in the form of a series of questions sent round to British missions in the region on the station's continued 'value and usefulness' in the summer of 1947, by which time *Sharq* had Colonel Edward C Hodgkin as its third Director. They reported favourably, 'and that the popularity of the station is in most cases at least equal to, if not exceeding that of the BBC'.

Particularly appealing was the entertainment but also the local items. The station also fed newspapers around the region and in response to this demand had recently started a news broadcast at dictation speed. The Amman station compared it to its nearest rival the *Palestine Broadcasting Service*, which was viewed as having a Jewish bias, whereas *Sharq* 'represents Arab opinion fairly'. From Cairo, a comment on the continued absence of 'flag-waving',

The fact that while *Sharq el Adna* is generally recognised as a British-sponsored station, its programmes are oriented in such a way as to maintain Arab goodwill. (Those few Arabs who think about such things are puzzled as to the real policy of *Sharq el Adna*, since, broadly speaking, the station cannot be charged with any objectionable grinding of the British axe and is usually careful to present the Arab viewpoint in an acceptable light).

As well as information on *Sharq's* popularity with the public, respondents had also been asked for suggestions as to improvements and again from Cairo, 'that *Sharq* might devote more time to British publicity work in the Middle East', ie, that a propaganda station should broadcast some propaganda! However, and this is the crux of the dilemma facing the station, any such material 'would need very careful handling since any noticeable move in this direction might easily result in a falling-off in the station's popularity'.¹⁵

Eventually, shortly before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 the station was forced to move once more to Limassol, as 'one of the British military units to come to Cyprus from Palestine', (Palestine Post 3 April 1950: 2) where, once established, it was but part of 'a huge propaganda apparatus in the Middle East following the end of the war', having at the time the most powerful medium wave transmitter in the

¹⁵ TNA FO 953/60 PME1421 Middle East Information Department, replies from Information Officers, July 1947

region, and run since its move to Cyprus by MI6 (Franzen 2009: 752). As the Cold War developed, its preoccupations came to the fore, and 'a good deal of time and effort was expended by Western propagandists, such as the Information Research Department (IRD) of the British Foreign Office in attempting to get their major themes carried by Arabic broadcasting stations'. British-run stations like *Sharq*, along with the BBC were favoured outlets. For example 'In late January and mid-February 1955, *Sharq* broadcast, '11 talks containing anti-Communist angles and 5 of a directly anti-communist nature'(Vaughan 2004: 62). Islam, which had been a prominent feature on the station from the start, was also a major plank of the propaganda effort of the IRD. It was seen as a bulwark against communism and 'the IRD continued energetically to propagate belief in the fundamental incompatibility of communism and Islam', going so far in Egypt as to produce sermons for distribution to Imams (Vaughan 2004: 64-5).

Central to what James Vaughan sees as the failure of British and American propaganda efforts in the region, was the Arab-Israel dispute and 'the pernicious influence of the conflict was felt in almost every branch of the information and cultural diplomacy programmes in the region'. Britain and the US did not always agree on policy towards first partition and then recognition of the state of Israel and part of the British propaganda effort including *Sharq*, was aimed at distancing Britain from the policies of US President Truman. Because of its stance on Palestine, *Sharq* was accused of broadcasting anti-Jewish and after 1948, anti-Israeli material, leading to

allegations that the Foreign Secretary was using Sharq 'as a sly agent of ours which can say what Mr Bevin is afraid to say openly and get away with' (Vaughan 2005: 128-38).

The early nineteen fifties also saw relations with Egypt under strain, at first over the number of British troops stationed in the country, then over Sudan, then of course over the Suez Canal. A 'secret' memorandum from April 1952 commented on the role of 'information work' in the region. 'Our task' it read, referring to the previous winter's confrontation with the Egyptian government which involved the mass mobilisation of British troops 'was primarily to ensure that in an area where public opinion must be expected to be emotionally on the side of the Egyptians', what the writer opined was a 'true version of the facts' should be made known and the case made for a continuing British military presence. In this regard 'Our most effective weapon was undoubtedly broadcasting. The BBC, with its reputation for accurate news reporting, broadcasts in Arabic for three hours a day at key listening times, and our clandestine station at Cyprus broadcasts a full day's programme in Arabic'.

Both were widely listened to and were used as a source of news by Arab newspaper editors. Looking forward, it went on,

it would appear that in any future crisis in Anglo-Egyptian relations the Middle East states other than Egypt are a better propaganda target

than the Egyptians themselves. This is because the other Arab states are a softer target and more susceptible to the arguments which we are able to put forward, whereas the Egyptians are at the mercy of their own Ministers, press and radio.

Their work should be 'aiming at detaching other Arab sympathies from Egypt'.¹⁶

Finance and control

The *precise* identity of who or what body financed and ultimately controlled *Sharq al-Adna* both before and after it moved to Cyprus has been difficult to determine. Much has been suspected, but little known for sure. Most of the audience, who would have had various levels of understanding of or interest in its provenance would have simply listened to its programmes. The official response to those who were interested was always at the very least equivocal. Quizzed in parliament in 1948 over broadcasts in support of armed action by the Arab countries in Palestine, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin denied the station was run by the Foreign Office and said 'It is operated by a body of people connected with the Arabs' and that 'The people who have been operating it are the same

¹⁶ TNA FO 953/1230 Memorandum Note on Information Work in the Middle East April 15 1952 CFR Barclay, Information Policy Department

people who operated it for years in Palestine'(Hansard 16 June 1948) .¹⁷
Asked similar questions two years later, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, John Dugdale, said *Sharq* was run by 'a private company registered in Cyprus, its main object being to promote the exchange of cultural and general information throughout the Near East'.¹⁸

The *Palestine Post* had announced in April 1950 (3 April 1950: 3), that the station had been taken over by a private company, the Near East Association, under the chairmanship of Sir Harold MacMichael, former High Commissioner in Palestine, but it was registered not in the UK but in Cyprus. Even that is in some doubt, as 'Sharq al-Adna had never been officially identified as a commercial station at all; it was omitted, for example, from the list of commercial broadcasting stations in the colonies produced by the Colonial Office for the Beveridge Broadcasting Report of 1949' (Rawnsley 1996: 502).

What has also not been clear, is precisely when the station began taking advertising and so became the 'commercial' station it was supposed to be. It arrived in Limassol as a military operation in 1948 and at some point made the transition. Kamel Qustandi, interviewed in 2015 at the age of 89, said this was in 1953, at the suggestion of the Arab staff and he went to London the following year to deal directly with British advertisers (Al Jawzi Al Maqdisi 2010). Subsequent releases of government papers have

¹⁷ Hansard, Oral Answers Radio Station, Cyprus (Propaganda) Mr Bevin to various questions 16 June 1948

¹⁸ Hansard, Question Mr Parker to Mr Dugdale 10 May 1950 P 1044/6

thrown additional light on the matter. A November 1956 Cabinet briefing note following the requisitioning of *Sharq al-Adna*, makes plain who paid for the station and how much. The *Palestine Post* in announcing the take-over of the station by the NEA in 1950 had said that at that time it had been financed by the Foreign Office to the tune of £10,000 per annum. The briefing note shows this to be a wild underestimate. It opened, 'The Near East Arab Broadcasting Station, or *Sharq-al-Adna* in Cyprus is owned by a private company secretly controlled by Her Majesty's Government...Its Directors and senior staff are British, but the majority of the staff are Arabs'. It continued, with a revelation which has not surfaced before about the precise sources of its funding, 'Before requisitioning the station it cost about £400,000 a year to run. It derived about £60,000 a year from advertising revenue *and a further £75,000 as a special contribution from the oil companies.*[my italics] The remainder was provided from the Secret Vote'.

This was lavish funding – at the same time the BBC External Services for the Middle East cost £141,000 per annum for broadcasting 38 ½ hours per week. So *Sharq* could well afford the sums paid to contributors.

Continuation in some form and with a similar mix of funding, from oil and other companies and government, was desirable. The new station would address 'the uneducated masses' while the BBC continued to broadcast to 'the educated and influential listeners'. Government funding would have to be from the Open, rather than the Secret Vote, though (the secret vote or secret service vote was the sum allocated by parliament each year to

the intelligence services). The advertising the station carried was a valuable contribution financially as well as for bolstering the station's 'legend'¹⁹ and was considered to have increased exports to the region by some £3,500,000 in the previous year and former clients were enquiring when it would be restarted. To ensure the future viability of the replacement for *Sharq* it might be necessary for HMG 'to purchase the station from its present ostensible owners' and perhaps to lease it to the new ones, but careful consideration would be necessary both in looking forward and 'including preservation of cover for Her Majesty's Government's interest in the previous set up'.²⁰

Denouement

Increasing tension between Britain and Egypt and concomitant pressure on *Sharq* to increase its anti-Egyptian content put its credibility as an independent entity under increasing strain, but in the autumn of 1955, it was still felt to be the best vehicle available to explain the benefits to local populations of the British presence in the region. By the following year this was no longer plausible and *Sharq* was being denounced, in Egypt at least 'as a dangerous imperialist agitator'. This was recognised in London. In a September 1956 discussion of plans to commandeer the station noted that 'Sharq on its present basis is becoming rather embarrassing, as many people now suspect the station to be controlled by HM Government'.

¹⁹ Term for cover for an agent. The false story or biography behind an assumed identity.

²⁰ TNA PREM 11/1149 Middle East (Policy) Briefing note for the Ministerial Committee on Overseas Broadcasting, by AD Dodds-Parker, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, November 20, 1956

Another went, 'I exclude the possibility of any rehabilitation of Sharq in its present form. Effectively Sharq has been "blown"'.²¹

And so to the tripartite attack on Egypt. Communication featured prominently in military preparations. According to Brigadier Bernard Ferguson, Director of Psychological Warfare, in the original plan, 'the very first stick of bombs' on the 31st October, would target Radio Cairo, and *Sharq al-Adna* would be commandeered to replace it immediately, (Ferguson 1970: 265). In the end, *Radio Cairo* was relieved for a few days, but *Sharq* was commandeered. As foreseen, this was to prove no simple matter. The question of the loyalty of the Arab staff was key. A Foreign Office minute in September noted, 'As I understand it, one of the main difficulties about using Sharq to put over the British point of view in a big way is that the Arab staff are likely to desert if this is done'.²² Ferguson had tried and failed to recruit Arabic speakers against this possibility: Egyptians feared repercussions for their families in Egypt and approaches to the BBC drew a blank. Roy Poston, the then Director of *Sharq al-Adna*, was told 'in veiled terms' what was being planned. Poston's reaction was not ideal: 'His sympathies were deeply and genuinely with the Egyptians and he was distressed at the very thought of it'. Poston assured him, echoing Law's words from 1941, 'that none of his

²¹ TNA FO 1110/947 Middle East, Broadcasting to the Middle East, Unsigned, undated (but September 1956 because of its position in the file)

²² TNA FO 1110/947 Middle East, Broadcasting to the Middle East, minute P Dean to Mr Rennie, 26 September 1956

Arab or *British* staff [my italics] would agree to broadcast our bulletins or propaganda'(Ferguson 1970: 267).

And so it proved. The station was commandeered and one of the staff, Massara Khoury, 'who was in tears' was at some point forced 'to broadcast live news reports against Egypt and the Arabs'(Al Jawzi Al Maqdisi 2010). The following night, the staff put out another message repeated in English and Arabic all through the night of the 31st October/1st November, saying 'the staff of *Sharq Al-Adna* was heart and soul with their Arab brethren; *they dissociated themselves with the broadcasts of the night before* and that *Sharq Al-Adna* [my italics] was no longer to be believed' (Ferguson 1970: 267).

Ferguson was alerted first thing in the morning by monitors in London and had the entire staff arrested, including Poston who, according to Kamel Qustandi, had suggested that the staff resign, saying he no longer recognised his own country(Al Muqaddam 2015).

Conclusion

It is tempting, especially if one concentrates on the station's demise, to say the career of *Sharq Al-Adna* was a failure. Certainly, James Vaughan views the propaganda efforts of both the British and the Americans to

have failed, as 'Western prestige and popularity in the Middle East declined precipitously' after WW2. The technical operations of both countries' information work was sophisticated and effective; the problem was the message. There was too much concentration on Cold War preoccupations and too little attention paid to Arab nationalism and to the question of Palestine and the Palestinians (Vaughan 2005: 238-249). Of *Sharq*, one might argue that the reasons for its existence in the precarious days of 1941 were never tested. The Arabs never had to choose between the British, the Germans, or the Italians. The fighting decided that. The station had then to reinvent itself to take account of the unmitigated disaster which the founding of the state of Israel represented to its audience, at the same time as reflecting, as subtly as it could, the changing policies of its hidden controllers. It also had to negotiate a path through the minefield of increasingly fraught Anglo-Egyptian relations, which finally proved too much. The carefully constructed edifice collapsed under the weight of its own internal contradictions—the British were no longer prepared to compromise the message in furtherance of their immediate political and military interests—the mailed fist of anti-Nasser propaganda instead of the velvet glove, of near-invisible persuasion wrapped in music, poetry and readings from the Koran. The staff, as predicted from the start, though prepared to work for one of the colonial powers, would not countenance being tools of their own oppression. In this refusal, they had the support of their British boss.

One could further state that *Sharq's* greatest achievements had little connection to the aims and objectives of the station's controllers but arose out of the means they chose to employ: the creation of an Arab language radio station, which broadcast Arab music, history, culture, religion and discourse. *Sharq* was largely successful for most of its career in masking who controlled it, but to what precise effect is hard to say. It might be tautologous but the results of subtle propaganda would be by definition subtle. But *Sharq al-Adna* was one of the most popular radio stations in the Middle East for fifteen crucial years, launched or popularised the careers of musicians, singers, writers, directors and producers. It was a vehicle for Arab culture and a platform for diverse voices throughout the region and was a university for nascent Arab broadcasting.

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