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Alhurra, the Free One: Assessing U.S. Satellite Television in the Middle East

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Introduction

The current U.S. Administration has identified Arab media as a source of anti-Americanism. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld blamed Al-Jazeera, the leading Arabic language news station, for encouraging Islamism by broadcasting beheadings of hostages in Iraq, a charge the station denies.^[1] In his State of the Union address in 2004, President George Bush focused on Arab television stations he claimed were responsible for “hateful propaganda” against the United States. According to the Administration, the stations distort news and show explicit images producing anti-Americanism.^[2]

To combat these negative images, the United States has begun its own public relations campaign. One major part of this is the launching of the American satellite station, Alhurra. Alhurra, meaning “the free one,”^[3] would counter Arab media outlets and promote the American point of view.

Are these efforts likely to succeed, winning the hearts and minds of Arab and Muslim TV viewers? Instead of promoting the American perspective in the Middle East, polls and direct interviews indicate that the new U.S. satellite station has become largely irrelevant, serving mainly to clearly identify a news point of view as “American,” and thus facilitate rejection of its content due to this taint.

Alhurra’s Broadcast Coverage

Launched on Valentine’s Day 2004, Alhurra was intended to move “the people of the region away from extremism and violence and toward democracy and freedom,”^[4] countering the presumed negative image of the United States portrayed by Arab media stations. A triad of new U.S. media was launched to this end in the Arab world: a satellite TV station, a radio station called Radio Sawa, and Hi magazine, which together are publicly funded through a half a billion dollar grant to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, producers of the Voice of America. Alhurra is targeted at the general public, especially those under the age of 30, in contrast to previous U.S. public

diplomacy efforts which were geared toward elites.[5] Alhurra's broadcasting includes cooking and fashion shows, entertainment, geographic and technological programs, documentaries, and news.[6]

Alhurra currently broadcasts only to the Middle East. It is available in Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt for those owning satellites. However, some satellite providers do not offer it and there is heavy pressure on them to keep the station off.[7] Alhurra was allocated \$102 million start up funding,[8] \$62 million for first year by Congress, and \$40 million more for an Iraq-specific station.[9] Fifty-two million dollars were proposed for the station in 2005, and \$652 million requested for international broadcasting in 2006.[10] This includes the proposed expansion of Alhurra to European forums and the creation of a Farsi (Iranian) language satellite station.[11]

The station's news coverage differs markedly from other stations in the area. Coverage is heavily weighted toward statements by American officials. During my research, Bush's speeches were covered extensively, occasionally taking up most of news broadcast time. Interviews with American officials about American events were translated and shown in Arabic. American military officials in Iraq were interviewed when events occurred in Iraq, and Israeli officials spoke on events in southern Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority. Reporting a clash between Hizbullah and the Israeli army in Southern Lebanon, newscasters stated that the Israelis knew it was coming, that it was not a surprise to them. This is important since the knowledge and competence of the Israeli army have been discredited by its unsuccessful occupation of the area. Coverage of the military skirmish focused on the Israeli side, showing Israeli soldiers preparing for war. Newscasters discussed the "message" that Israel was attempting to send. This contrasts with other (Arab) media coverage of the same events, which presented the view of events from the Arab angle, the effect on the Palestinians and Lebanese.

Breaking news is particularly problematic, adding to the problems in becoming a news source in times of crisis. Alhurra was broadcasting a cooking show when Sheikh Yassin was assassinated by Israel, and in contrast to all the Arab television stations, Alhurra remained in the kitchen. The others switched to cover the breaking news. The station's director later admitted this was a mistake.[12] Similarly, the Cairo Khan el Khalili terrorist incident that killed three tourists was not covered for over an hour after other stations had switched.[13] The station's heavy reliance on pre-produced, western, and sub-titled programs has been addressed recently, with the addition of more local material, specifically town-hall type debates and coverage geared to the elections in Iraq, Palestine, and the United States.

The U.S. point of view is communicated clearly through news shows and promotional spots. Alhurra's promotional spots emphasize elections and protest in the Arab world. One spot ends with King Abdallah of Jordan saying in English that "we" are making the Middle East a better place, after pictures of the Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and Syrian troops leaving Lebanon. Other spots show Iraqis voting and Egyptian and Lebanese protestors.[14] News talk shows are pre-occupied with establishing the authoritarian nature of Iran, for example, demonstrating the accomplishments of professional, westernized Arab women, and refuting complaints about corruption, in Morocco for example. Corruption is central to Islamist grievances, a cause presumably common to the United States.

The U.S. station is accused of preaching, condescension, and cultural inappropriateness.[15] Its name, the "free one," assumes the traditional U.S. stance of representing the better society but contradicts its actual journalistic nature.[16] Owned by a government and under strict guidelines regarding its coverage, critics argue that it cannot be free. In fact, the station broadcasts without market research (or advertising) to determine audience demand.[17] For some, Alhurra confirms that the United States has embraced the promotion of propaganda more commonly associated with the dictatorial and Soviet regimes.[18]

The imposed limitations include not airing interviews with leaders of terrorist groups, such as the Taliban, or negative aspects of the coalition presence in Iraq.[19] Similarly neglected are major issues of concern to Arab viewers, such as the Abu Ghraib scandal and the plight of the Palestinians.[20] The spin of events also differs. People are not “martyred” but “killed,” and the station does not call terrorism “so-called terrorism” as other Arab stations do. Further, the common greeting used by Arab channels, *al-sallamu ‘alaykum*, viewed as religious, is avoided in Alhurra, whose hosts instead say “welcome back.”[21] Ironically, this last aspect fuels perceptions that the United States is against the region’s religion.

By far the station’s most popular shows are its non-news coverage, including travel, documentary, fashion, cinema and music programs.[22] It also has interviews with local fashion designers and writers. Hollywood events such as the Golden Globes and the Emmy awards are broadcast (live), along with baseball and football games to draw more male viewers. But the increase in such coverage is criticized by the Broadcast Board of Governors, the oversight body for Alhurra, since the station was intended for news. Mouafac Harb, the station’s director, defends the fashion programs, saying that people in the Middle East should see that there is a “grand and beautiful world” beyond their borders.[23]

Further, the plethora of media alternatives complicates the question of what Alhurra adds. The station was intended by the U.S. government to cover new and difficult issues presumably avoided by other Arab stations. However, Marc Lynch’s recent research demonstrates that such an assessment of Arab television is false. Indeed, Arab satellite stations regularly cover difficult and presumably taboo subjects, including Islamist movements, torture in local prisons, censorship, corruption, women’s rights, government repression, and economic problems such as unemployment and child exploitation.[24] This new coverage is heavily focused on self-criticism of Arab society.

Alhurra is faced with what one writer described as an “existential” problem,[25] which results in the station either appearing to be the old-style government-sponsored propaganda, or evading Congress’ dictates. It cannot be critical of the United States due to its structure and organizational funding, but to effectively draw viewers from other stations for news coverage it must cover a variety of viewpoints as the others do, which inevitably involve criticism of U.S. policies. Currently, the station treads the line between the two, aided partly by Congress’ inability to directly monitor its broadcasts which are in Arabic.[26]

Fun with Polling

The view of Alhurra as a success in Washington, leading to increased funding for the station and plans for expansion, comes from one survey determining that 29% of viewers watched Alhurra during the previous week.[27] Numerous independent studies contradict this result, and further question the relevance of such statistics for judging effectiveness of the station. Polls do not assess changes in viewer attitudes, or indicate the station is a primary news source. Arab audiences are critical viewers with long experience with state-owned media, censorship and propaganda. They judge stations by the degree of separation from government, and triangulate multiple media sources according to their own pre-existing beliefs and values.[28] As a result, a common viewing pattern is to flip between stations, comparing the coverage and perspectives, while keeping in mind the station’s ideology. One study found a large discrepancy between satellite television and attitudes toward the West. In fact, the most critical attitudes toward the west came from those countries with the lowest percentages of satellite TV viewers.[29]

A survey by Zogby International and conducted by Shibley Telhami in June 2004 across a number of Arab countries found no one turned to Alhurra as a first choice for news; a small number, 3.8%, picked it as a second choice.[30] A Palestinian poll found only 1.1% watched Alhurra, whereas over 58% viewed al-Jazeera, 12% al-Manar, and 10% al-Arabiyya. Gallup’s poll

concluded that 6% of Iraqis watched Alhurra in the previous week. A survey by the Arab Advisors Group found fewer Egyptians watched the station (3%) than viewed BBC World (5%) or the government's Nile News (9%).^[31] A survey of satellite users in greater Cairo found that most viewers (over 64%) felt Alhurra was not trustworthy as a news source; college-educated viewers trusted the station a bit more than those with only a high school diploma.^[32] In comparison, almost 86% felt al-Jazeera was trustworthy, and almost 67% felt CNN was trustworthy.^[33] Tellingly, only 8% of Alhurra's small viewing public deemed the station's coverage could be trusted.^[34] The polls that indicate higher viewership for the station also show its irrelevance as a news source. One poll indicates that around a quarter of Jordanians and Saudis watch Alhurra at least once a week, but it is not a primary source of news for them.^[35]

Direct interviews confirmed the conclusions of pollsters. The most common reaction to Alhurra was indifference. It is seen as just another station, similar to other ideological and non-commercial stations. Throughout Lebanon and Jordan, people overwhelmingly believe that Alhurra shows them what the United States wants them to know. Some believed the station was Israeli. Young Iraqis living in Jordan have hope in the U.S. plan for Iraq and therefore watch Alhurra to see the vision of their future. The few positive opinions of Alhurra mentioned only the entertainment coverage or the cultural interview programs. Some believed that Alhurra was attempting to impose and convert Arabs to American ideas. In Beirut, while some Christians watch the station, recent interviews indicate that for the overwhelming majority of the population in the Muslim areas Alhurra is "all but dead." Marc Lynch's informal study of Alhurra's importance determined that the station went virtually unnoticed in the Arab media.^[36] Street interviews in Cairo demonstrated that the predominant impressions of the station were either indifference or attraction to the fluff and public interest programming, not news. Some felt the channel was low quality; others compared it to their own state-sponsored media. Many were hostile, considering the channel Israeli or stating it should be banned. The majority felt the channel was boring.^[37]

Conclusion

The head-on ideological assault represented by Alhurra has proved counterproductive. The presence of the American station sets up a counterpoint and identifies particular views as unambiguously American, making rejection of those ideas clearer and adoption of alternative perspective more acceptable by contrast. Observers argue that for the Iraqi elections to have an effect outside that country, they had to be viewed on al-Jazeera, not Alhurra.^[38]

Importantly, the presence of Alhurra bears witness to the effectiveness and power of Arab media, since they were so dangerous the United States was pushed to legitimize itself, to defend itself against counter-claims.^[39] This demonstrates the fallibility or weakness of the opposition (the United States), a necessary ingredient in drawing recruits to a movement. Further, it adds to the region's sense of siege, legitimating the perception of being targeted by an American attempt against ideas, culture, and values.

Thus, instead of entering the debate as desired, the United States is adding fuel to it, arguably distracting the audience from the critical debate on government reform to take up a defensive position vis-à-vis the west. A better option than initiating new stations is to engage the debate through existing media channels. Former Ambassador Rugh maintains that U.S. officials should participate in existing stations, in effect entering the debate and creating dialogue among the players, not one-way monologues.^[40] Recently, U.S. policy has begun to embrace this policy alternative, with Administration officials participate in Arab media such as al-Jazeera.^[41]

Alhurra communicates values consistent with the American way of life, highlighting the glamorous side of globalization and identification with Israel for example, while Arab stations speak to the struggling middle class, promote community values and respect, and highlight the plight of Arab victims. As social mobilization theories have demonstrated, perspective or frames of reference

must resonate with the audience to be accepted; promotion of a viewpoint is not unequivocally received and believed. The reception depends on community outlooks, values, and identity, to name a few. If Alhurra succeeds in obtaining a serious audience, it will be among the upper class and those already pro-American.

Note: The views expressed are those of the author alone and not those of the Naval Postgraduate School or any other institutional affiliation. Research for this article was undertaken through the support of the Marshall Center's Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism project. Alhurra was viewed in June 2005, from Jordan. Around 50 random street interviews were conducted in Lebanon and Jordan with the aid of researchers. I supplemented this qualitative research with numerous surveys conducted on Arab media.

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