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The Middle East Television Network: An Overview

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The Middle East Television Network: An Overview

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Summary

With the United States engaged in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the war on terrorism, Congress and the Bush Administration have created a U.S. government-sponsored Arabic-language television station to bolster U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. Supporters of this initiative have asserted that there is a receptive audience for U.S. television, which could counterbalance negative perceptions of U.S. policy that are commonly found in the Arab media. Critics maintain that the Arab media market is already saturated with Western stations and that U.S. public diplomacy funds would be more effectively used in other programs. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, “the government has begun some promising initiatives in television and radio broadcasting to the Arab world, Iran, and Afghanistan. These efforts are beginning to reach large audiences. The Broadcasting Board of Governors has asked for much larger resources. It should get them.” The Administration has requested \$79 million for FY2006, a figure that incorporates operations for the satellite television network *Al-Hurra* (Arabic for “the free one”), which began broadcasting in February 2004. For more information on U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East, see CRS Report RL31889, *The Al-Jazeera News Network: Opportunity or Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?* This report will be updated periodically.

Background

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush Administration and Congress have placed a renewed emphasis on U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. These efforts have culminated in the establishment of a number of programs and policy initiatives designed to promote U.S. values and interests, foster communication with young people, and encourage socioeconomic reform in the Arab world. In March 2002, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG)¹ launched Radio Sawa, an Arabic

¹ The BBG is a quasi-independent entity responsible for all U.S. government and government-sponsored, non-military, international broadcasting.

language radio station that combines western and Arab popular music with news broadcasts and specialized programming. The State Department also implemented the “Shared Values” Program, a \$15 million television advertising campaign that promoted positive images of Muslim life in America. In December 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced the formation of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) to fund civil society projects that foster political, economic, and educational development in the Arab world.²

It is within this context that policymakers have formulated a further step in the development of public diplomacy in the region — the Middle East Television Network (METN), or Al-Hurra (Arabic for “the free one”). Members of Congress from both parties, together with Administration officials and private industry leaders, believe that Al-Hurra will enable the United States to get its message across to millions of people in the Middle East, where one third of all households with television reception have either cable or satellite TV.³ Advocates of Al-Hurra argue that the U.S. government needs to compete in the Arab television market with regionally based broadcasters like Al-Jazeera, the controversial 24-hour Arab news network based in Qatar.⁴ They stress the need for the United States to control the distribution of its own media without having to rely on others. For example, in Egypt, Radio Sawa’s signal can only be picked up sporadically on an AM radio frequency out of Cyprus due to the Egyptian government’s refusal to allow Sawa to be broadcast locally over a stronger FM signal.⁵

The Experience of Radio Sawa

Although radio and television are different media, supporters of U.S.-sponsored Arabic television have highlighted the success of Radio Sawa in attracting listeners across the Middle East. According to officials at the BBG, Sawa blends popular Western and Arab music to attract younger listeners to its news broadcasts and special-interest shows, such as Sawa Chat, Free Zone, and Ask the World Now.⁶ The BBG’s own research has concluded that this strategy has been successful in penetrating the 17- to 28-year-old demographic group in places like Amman, Jordan, and in Morocco.⁷ BBG officials point out that prior to the establishment of Radio Sawa, only 2% of Arab listeners tuned in to

² For more information on the Middle East Partnership Initiative, see CRS Report RS21457, *The Middle East Partnership Initiative: An Overview*.

³ “Vying for Eyes, Ears of Iraq,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 2003.

⁴ For more information on Al-Jazeera, see CRS Report RL31889, *The Al-Jazeera News Network: Opportunity or Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?*

⁵ Interview with Joe Lenski, executive vice president, Edison Media Research, June 25, 2003.

⁶ Sawa Chat asks people on the street to respond to questions dealing mostly with social issues such as marriage. Ask the World Now is more focused on U.S. policy in the Middle East.

⁷ According to survey research from ACNielsen, 73% of all persons 15 and older in Casablanca and Rabat, Morocco tuned to Radio Sawa every week, more than any other station. See, “High Radio Sawa Ratings - Survey,” *BBC Monitoring Media*, April 5, 2004.

the Voice of America's (VOA) Arabic broadcasts.⁸ A survey in Amman, Jordan, revealed that 42% of young people who listen to popular music said that Sawa is the station they listened to most.⁹ However, according to Arab media analyst Mamoun Fandy, "my own observations are based on really sort of long conversations with these age groups in two countries, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and my feeling was I came out with the conclusion that people were listening to Radio Sawa in terms of music, but in terms of political programming, they go somewhere else."¹⁰

On October 13, 2004, the *Washington Post* reported that a draft report prepared by the State Department's inspector general criticizes Radio Sawa for having focused too much on gaining audience share and not enough time on presenting discussions of U.S. policies.¹¹ BBG officials have defended the approach of Radio Sawa, noting that a combination of music and news is the best way to reach its target audience.

Al-Hurra Programming

Al-Hurra began broadcasting in February 2004. It resembles a typical American commercial network but with more time devoted to news programming. This format is similar to existing Arab satellite variety channels, though it differs from the all-news format of Al-Jazeera. Al-Hurra, which is based in Springfield, Virginia, features the usual array of network programming: morning talk shows, children's education and entertainment programming, women's shows, soap operas, sitcoms, movies, and nightly news shows. As Al-Hurra is still in its startup phase, it relies more heavily on re-broadcasting existing American shows and movies with Arabic subtitles. Although Al-Hurra has no foreign bureaus of its own, it partners with Associated Press Television News (APTN), which provides facilities for Al-Hurra's foreign correspondents based in the Middle East.¹²

BBG officials have been adamant in insisting that Al-Hurra will not show inflammatory pictures of violence in troubled areas in the region or use inflammatory language.¹³ Reflecting a similar policy, Radio Sawa's editors use the descriptive term of suicide bomber rather than the religious term of martyr to describe a suicide terrorist. This policy differs sharply from the strategy of Al-Jazeera, which is well known for airing lead-in segments to news reports, which often feature montages of violence in the West

⁸ Interview with Joan Mower, director of communications, Broadcasting Board of Governors, June 18, 2003.

⁹ "Reaching Arabs Via Airwaves Diplomacy," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 26, 2002.

¹⁰ "Interview with Mamoun Fandy," *Online Newshour Special Report: Public Diplomacy*, Jan. 2003.

¹¹ "The Role of Radio Sawa In Mideast Questioned," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2004.

¹² Interview with Bert Kleinman, Al Hurra Network President, July 1, 2004. Media analysts note that in the Arab market, live coverage of events in Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza, and elsewhere is one of the primary ways of drawing large numbers of viewers. Al Jazeera's credibility with many Arab viewers is largely based on its ability to have its reporters on scene, particularly in war zones.

¹³ Interview with Joan Mower, director of communications, Broadcasting Board of Governors, June 18, 2003.

Bank and Gaza Strip, Afghanistan, or Iraq. These short snippets contain flashes of provocative pictures, usually of human suffering, accompanied by dramatic background music.

Since its inception, Al-Hurra's programming has received mixed reviews. Some observers have praised its roundtable discussion programs, such as "All Directions," for featuring a mix of Arab and U.S. political analysts, who have raised numerous questions regarding the U.S. role in Iraq, domestic Arab politics in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, and the consequences of Israel's Gaza withdrawal plan. Al-Hurra also has had extensive coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, the recent killings of Hamas leaders, and the preliminary deposition of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. There is also evidence that viewers enjoy Al-Hurra's lifestyle and documentary shows. On the other hand, some Arabs have been put off by Al-Hurra's symbolism in its promotional spots, which show scenes of wild horses running free and eyelids slowly opening, while accompanying messages encourage viewers to "decide for themselves." Some Arab critics believe the name "Al-Hurra" (the free one) is patronizing, as it implies that Arab viewers have no alternative but to watch state-controlled television. According to Shibley Telhami, an expert on Arab media at the Brookings Institution, survey research from various Arab countries indicates that Arabs don't consider Al-Hurra a first choice for news and that only 3.8% picked it as a second choice.¹⁴

Al-Hurra: The Policy Debate

Overview. Like other tools of public diplomacy, Al-Hurra has supporters and detractors. Essentially, the debate over the ability of Al-Hurra to improve the image of the United States in the Arab world is a microcosm of a much larger debate over public diplomacy tactics in the Middle East. Some officials want to direct U.S. activity toward Arab young people. Other observers want more open discussions with broader Arab audiences and elites over U.S. policies. Some commentators want nongovernmental organizations to carry the torch of public diplomacy in the region. Lastly, some commentators dismiss public diplomacy efforts entirely, so long as U.S. policies remain deeply unpopular in the region. According to Nihad Awad, executive director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, "the problem isn't what you say in the news. It is the position that the United States has taken in the Palestinian issue."¹⁵ These critics believe that Arabs don't need to be sold on the positive aspects of U.S. society. Furthermore, they maintain that Al-Jazeera is popular precisely because it is perceived as being more independent even though it is financed mostly by the Qatari government, and that Al-Hurra would be discredited in the region for its ties to the U.S. government.

Supporters of Al-Hurra. Al-Hurra's supporters often assert that the indigenous Arab media will neither explain nor analyze U.S. policies in the region favorably or even objectively. Many U.S. policymakers deeply distrust state-run Arab media organizations and have even less confidence in the ability of all-news networks, such as Al-Jazeera, to deliver fair and accurate reporting of U.S. involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. Al-Hurra's supporters feel emboldened by a perceived success of both past and existing U.S.

¹⁴ "VOA Changes Prompt Staffer Protests," *USA Today*, July 12, 2004.

¹⁵ "Radio Mogul Heads U.S. Arabic TV Network," *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 26, 2003.

broadcasting activities in the Middle East and elsewhere. Some officials at the BBG have expressed pride in the ability of Radio Sawa to reach a mass audience and feel that a television network would only build on this success. According to Pattiz, “we thought by creating a music-driven format that we could attract the largest possible audience to what was also our public diplomacy mission ... the greatest message in the world doesn’t mean a lot if no one is listening.” Furthermore, to those who accuse government-sponsored entities such as Radio Sawa of not having editorial independence, the BBG stated that it is committed to being accurate and objective in its newscasts.¹⁶ The BBG believes that its mission is to serve as a firewall to protect the professional independence and integrity of its broadcasters.

Substance and Style Issues. For those contesting the direction and format of Al-Hurra, but not international broadcasting itself, there is a fear that Al-Hurra will overemphasize style over substance. Critics point to Radio Sawa as an example of a U.S.-sponsored endeavor that inundates listeners with popular music, while skirting discussion of the issues that matter most to U.S. policymakers: Iraq, the war on terrorism, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In response to U.S. officials’ arguments that several of Radio Sawa’s daily shows devote time to more newsworthy topics, observers counter by noting that most of Radio Sawa’s discussion programs are focused more on social and cultural issues relating to young people such as marriage and westernization than on controversial discussions of U.S. policies. Critics believe that Al-Hurra would be more effective if it tried to foster an honest dialogue with Arab audiences over current events, even in cases where U.S. perceptions differ from Arab attitudes, rather than avoiding the tough issues. These pundits believe that in order for Al-Hurra to have an effective public diplomacy strategy, it must try to win the battle for ideas in the Middle East. As an alternative to Al-Hurra, Robert Satloff, a Middle East Expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, suggests that “it would be much cheaper to offer tax incentives to U.S. broadcasters to perform the service of dubbing and then duplicating their news in Arabic. The fact that CNN and Fox News are nongovernmental enterprises ensures far greater credibility than what is proposed for [Al-Hurra].”¹⁷

Some opponents of Al-Hurra would prefer policymakers to adopt alternative approaches to confronting the Arab media. According to media analyst Mamoun Fandy, “you need to change the software to change the Arab minds, and you don’t change them by television because television coming from America, also, will be seen differently because these people are already exposed to American television.”¹⁸ Instead of focusing on broadcasting, some experts believe that the best public diplomacy tool at the United States’ disposal is its education system and governing institutions, which many in the region, who have been exposed to U.S. universities, consider a model.

Varying Survey Results. According to an ACNielsen survey released by the BBG in October 2004, weekly viewing rates for Al Hurra among adults with satellite

¹⁶ “Air Wars: The Battle for Arabic Television and Radio Audiences,” *RAND Review - Perspectives*, Dec. 2002.

¹⁷ “Wrong Answer to Al-Jazeera,” *Washington Post*, Apr. 4, 2003.

¹⁸ “Interview with Mamoun Fandy,” *Online Newshour Special Report: Public Diplomacy*, Jan. 2003., op. cit.

television ranged from 12% in Egypt to 33% in Kuwait. The ACNielsen survey also noted that 75% of viewers who watch Al Hurra rate its news as either very reliable or somewhat reliable. According to a private survey conducted by the Arab market research firm the Arab Advisors Group, 4.6% of households with satellite television in Cairo, Egypt, watched Al Hurra for news programming.

Al-Hurra Funding

For FY2006, the Bush Administration has requested \$79 million for Al-Hurra and Radio Sawa. P.L.108-447, the FY2005 Consolidated Appropriations Act, provided \$64,969,000 for Middle East broadcasting and required the BBG to report on Al Hurra's coverage, audience, reception, and public response in the Arabic-speaking world. The FY2005 appropriation was an increase of \$20,200,000 above the Bush Administration's original request. The increase in funding is to support the separate Al-Hurra Iraq stream, which may require additional funding in the future.

Al-Hurra and Radio Sawa Appropriations FY2003-FY2006 Request

(Regular & Supplemental Appropriations: Current Year \$ in millions)

FY2003 Actual	FY2004 Estimate	FY2005 Estimate	FY2006 Request
\$30	\$82.25*	\$64.969	\$79

*The FY2004 Iraq Reconstruction Relief Funds Supplemental (P.L. 108-106) earmarked \$40 million to support a tailored version of Al-Hurra for Iraqi audiences.

Recent Congressional Action. H.R. 2862, the FY2006 House Appropriations bill for the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, provides \$78,578,000 for Arabic language broadcasting, which is \$558,000 below the President's request. In report language accompanying the bill, appropriators direct the BBG to provide quarterly status reports detailing the progress of the BBG's separate program stream specifically tailored for Iraq as called for in P.L. 108-106.¹⁹ H.R. 3057, the Senate FY2006 Foreign Operations and State Department Appropriations Bill, provides the full request for U.S.-sponsored Arabic language television and radio services.

¹⁹ H.Rept. 109-118 (H.R. 2862).