

**Testimony of Dr. Edmund Ghareeb  
Distinguished Scholar in Residence  
American University  
Before the  
Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism  
Committee on Foreign Relations  
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Thank you for inviting me to testify today. Let me start by saying that right now there is a credibility gap between the United States and the Middle East and due to recent events; this disparity is increasing at a startling pace.

Many times people in the Middle East will judge the U.S. based solely on its foreign policy and how it affects them. Now is the time the U.S. needs to reach out and try and close this expanding gap. Through government officials, like you, the U.S. reaches out to leaders in the Middle East.

However, there is a constituency that is much more important and we need to make every effort to reach out to them—the people who live in the Middle East.

In the past, there have been different outreach projects to connect with Middle Easterners, but they were specialized and could only reach a specific segment of the population. Some excellent programs were also undertaken by the USIA. Alhurra and Radio Sawa, the latest media endeavors by Congress and the Broadcasting Board of Governors are the most

comprehensive initiative to reach the people of the Middle East, without going through a government channel. Radio and satellite television ownership has exploded in recent years and is quickly becoming commonplace in many households in the Middle East. But, still reaching people in the Middle East in their homes is by no means an easy task.

Even before Alhurra was on the air, many newspapers and people in the region said it would be a mouthpiece for the United States government. In the months ahead Alhurra will have to prove itself over and over again, by providing credible and objective news coverage and analysis and by interviewing people who do not always agree with the current administration and its policies.

Effective communication, however, requires taking your audience's values, feelings and sense of identity into account. It is also not enough to tell people what is on your mind. We have to also listen to what is on their minds.

If Alhurra and Radio Sawa are able to prove that their news is reliable and free of government influence, they will have a unique opportunity to cover

stories that put U.S. policies in context and debate them freely. It bears repeating, however, there should be no interference from the U.S. government. As you know, most Arab media outlets are state run. They influence what is covered and how to cover it. Consequently, people in the region are quite suspicious of their official media. Furthermore, the Middle East is becoming saturated with radio and TV channels as well as the growing influence of the Internet. The information technology revolution, the CNN factor, and general unhappiness with their own official media contributed to the rise of the new Arab print and TV media. Today, in addition to the BBC and Radio Monte Carlo, many Arabs are getting their news and entertainment from channels such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiyya, Al Hayat - LBC, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, ANN, Future as well as Radio Orient, Orbit and Dream in addition to their own government channels and to channels beamed from the outside..

There have been several references in the news recently to the allegation that media outlets such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya are sparking the recent uprisings and encouraging people to take a stand against Coalition forces. I want to take issue with that point. The media that are in the region, like the U.S. media, mirror the feelings and attitudes of their audiences. They place

as much emphasis on reflecting the emotions and the attitudes in the region, as they do the events of the day. Yes, they may influence people, but the sentiment is already there, they are not creating something out of nothing. That is where Alhurra and Radio Sawa can have the biggest impact. They have the opportunity to provide the region with a straightforward approach to the news free of emotional coloration and innuendo.

When Alhurra started, an American journalist asked a Jordanian man what he thought of the program he had just watched, and the man said it was alright, that he had heard different people who represented a spectrum of views on the program; but when told that Alhurra was financed by the U.S. government, he decided the program was terrible; the change in attitude was noticeable.

A serious problem likely to face media coverage is that, sometimes, the same events mean different things to different audiences. Presenting events only as they are seen through American eyes may alienate Arabs and Muslims. To many Americans the fighters in Falluja or Najaf are insurgents and terrorists. For many Iraqis and Muslims they are resistance fighters and if they are killed they are martyrs.

When American forces in Iraq attack the insurgents in Falluja , it is perceived by many Arabs and Muslims ( because of collateral damage, the death of women and children, innocent bystanders) as though the U.S. is attacking Falluja, the city, and its inhabitants. When mosques in the city broadcast prayers, appealing to God, under fire, it looks like the U.S. is attacking Islam. These are emotionally charged situations, and the emotions differ depending on whether one is an Iraqi or an American. The challenge facing U.S. officials and U.S. media today is that message are being broadcast from one side to the other not just through the media but by the unspoken messages conveyed by symbols and by pictures.

It is also important to remember that strong opposition exists in the region to U.S. policies. Public diplomacy accompanied by a very credible media performance by Radio Sawa and Alhurra will not, by themselves, sway the majority of Arab and Muslim public opinion unless they come to believe that U.S. policies are reflecting their own concerns and aspirations for fairness, justice, a better way of life and increased political participation.

I also think it is important to point out that, yes, the sentiment against American policies is very strong right now, and our foreign policy, particularly in Iraq and in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, is at the heart of that. However, feelings towards the U.S. and the American people are not all negative. When you talk to people in the Middle East about personal freedom, democracy and values that Americans enjoy it is something they admire and are intrigued by.

Another thing that is almost universally liked about America is our pop culture. Music, movies, television and books—you name it and they are watching, listening and reading it. A quick glance at any television channel lineup or movie marquee and you are bound to find “Friends” or the latest blockbuster hit. And from the popularity of Radio Sawa, I think the same can be said for music. Several young people that I spoke to in the Middle East say that Radio Sawa has really neat songs and music, so they turn the volume up when the songs are on, but some turn it down when the news comes on because they feel that the news is slanted.

The U.S. needs to foster positive images of itself and its motives abroad and use them to help rebuild relations with the people of the Middle East. Right

now, positive American values and images are not getting exported nearly enough. The airwaves and newspapers in the Middle East are full of examples of the United States trying to dominate the region and to dictate its views upon the people of the Middle East. They look at Iraq and ask if this is a war for freedom and democracy, or a fight for oil and hegemony? They wonder about American commitment to the freedom of speech when the CPA closes a small newspaper or seeks to constrain popular satellite channels.

The U.S. needs a voice out there that is a voice of moderation—to speak clearly and objectively about the events in the Middle East and around the world. There is not a panacea or quick fix that will change sentiment all at once; it will be a long process. I am also not saying that you will be able to reach everyone.

However, I would like to applaud your efforts, whether it is through Alhurra and Radio Sawa, or by reaching out to speak to Middle East media, to bridge the gap between the U.S. and the Middle East, and to begin to narrow the gap between the people of the region and the American people.

Thank you again for allowing me to appear before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.