

**Testimony of Mouafac Harb
News Director
Middle East Television Network
Before the
Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism
Committee on Foreign Relations
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Let me first thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am honored to have been given a role in establishing both Radio Sawa and Alhurra television. We have been fortunate in the leadership and support we have received from the Administration, the Congress, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

It has been deeply satisfying to see Sawa and Alhurra develop from inspiration to reality with staff, stations, and a steadily growing audience.

The mission of this new Middle East Television Network is to broadcast accurate, timely and relevant news and information about the region, the world, and the United States to a broad, Arabic-speaking audience. By doing this, we seek to foster freedom and democracy in the Middle East.

That's a tall order. And I'm proud to tell you that we are beginning to fill it. All of us who work in these operations can feel it, and the data we've gathered – although early – appear to back that up.

It will take time, but I am confident we will succeed.

Until Sawa and Alhurra began broadcasting, people in the Arabic-speaking world got a steady diet of variations of just one story: Arab humiliation. The actual events are different from story to story and day to day. But they all carry this one message. It tells them that the Americans and Israelis are the source of all the trouble in their lives. They bear no responsibility themselves.

News outlets in the Middle East, especially television news outlets, see themselves as mirrors of public opinion and their audience's emotions. So they come at their reporting with a point of view already in place, and as a result they broadcast material that inflames viewers against America.

In the past few years, the Middle East has been a two-channel television market when it comes to news and information. The ratings for these two channels have been largely determined by one person and not by good journalism: Osama bin Laden. He knows neither channel wants to be frozen out, and he plays that for all it's worth, rewarding one or the other with an "exclusive" tape of his latest threats.

Well, it's not a two-channel market anymore, and the new player doesn't need to please bin Laden. Since February 14, Alhurra has brought a new idea to journalism in the Middle East – telling the truth. We do our work the way it's supposed to be done. We play it straight, and we behave like news professionals because that's what we are.

As Mr. Pattiz mentioned, we were business-like in our approach, and we studied our market from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Persian Gulf. We used what we learned to shape our product. What came out was the region's first news and information channel dedicated to telling the story completely and accurately. That means going beyond just reporting what happened. We provide background and context to explain why something happened and what the ramifications might be.

An example of this happened a couple of weeks ago in our coverage of the assassination of Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantissi. Alhurra was ending one of its hour-long newscasts when the story broke. We immediately reported it on the newscast. Then we followed up the initial report with five hours of live coverage, including reaction and analysis from around the world, and a look at what this would mean for the future of Hamas and Israeli/Palestinian relations.

You can't do that kind of work with amateurs. We've been able to recruit the best and the brightest – real pros from inside and outside the Middle East. On the editorial side, most of the people are from the region and were hand-picked to be representative of the wide territory we serve.

Everyone we've hired shares our sense of journalistic values. In fact, during the first round of interviews, many of them asked me if Alhurra could really be free if it was funded by the government. My answer, of course, was yes. And if they were astute enough to be concerned about this, they had just passed a major test for getting the job.

For some of my colleagues, joining the staff of Alhurra involved personal sacrifice – moving half a world away from family and friends to work for an organization that some people back home have been taught to believe is their enemy. I work with courageous people.

Alhurra has been on the air only two and a half months. In that time, the Middle East has endured some of the toughest news stories of the decade. Alhurra has been there to cover them. We were the first to report on a number of stories and we've garnered exclusive interviews. We created a program schedule for Alhurra that is flexible enough that we can break into regularly scheduled programming to cover breaking news if it is warranted.

Also in that short period of time, we've been on the receiving end of a lot of unfocused criticism from our competitors and their keepers. That tells us that we have their attention.

Good. We want that.

Television is a real “me too” industry. If a program succeeds on one network, you’re likely to see copies start popping up on the other ones. This is true everywhere.

We’re working to establish the gold standard that the “other guys” will want to rip off – the best technology, the finest professionals, the most innovative programming, the most eye-catching sets, the most compelling visuals. Our brand is freedom and democracy. We want them to follow us there.

As I said earlier, this will take time, but we will succeed.

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