

Testimony of the Broadcasting Board of Governors
As delivered by
Jeffrey Hirschberg, Joaquin Blaya, and Steven Simmons
Before the Subcommittee on
International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy, and Global
Women's Issues
Committee on Foreign Relations

October 15, 2009

Mr. Chairman, it is our pleasure to be here today to speak to the role of U.S. international broadcasting in advancing U.S. national interests in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This is an opportune moment to address you. Our nation continues to face the threat of violent extremism. In Iraq and Afghanistan, our government has deployed a wide range of strategic assets to meet the challenges to U.S. national security and to the safety and well-being of the Iraqi and Afghan people.

There is consensus inside and outside government that we cannot prevail against the extremists through force alone, and that it is of critical importance to engage audiences whose attention we and our adversaries both seek.

We will in our shared testimony today address the success of U.S. international broadcasting in Iraq and Afghanistan, citing copious research and other impact measures.

It is also an opportune moment to appear before you as this month marks the 10th anniversary of the independence of U.S. international broadcasting under the Broadcasting Board of Governors. This has been a period of remarkable growth in the scope and impact of BBG operations. With generous support from Congress, our funding has increased from \$400 million to over \$700 million, and our global audiences have grown from under 100 million to nearly 175 million.

We recognize, Senator Kaufman, your service on the Board and your many contributions to the BBG's accomplishments.

You often reminded us that the BBG's independence is critical to preserving credibility with our audiences. We must have the latitude to do the news straight up. Audiences will readily detect a slant or a hidden agenda, and they will tune out as a result.

But independence is not enough. As you also consistently urged, one of the Board's key duties is to safeguard our broadcasters' journalistic integrity by being a firewall between them and any government office or private party that would seek to determine their on-air content.

U.S. international broadcasting rests on the principle that truth serves the national interest – not the absolute truth as professed by ideologues and extremists but the objective truth that stems from balanced, factual news reporting.

This simple idea has had profound consequences. Accurate, comprehensive news from VOA during World War II contributed to the defeat of German Nazism. Then, during the long Cold War, the same news product from VOA and Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty broadcasts helped stymie and ultimately end Soviet totalitarianism.

At the commemoration of the BBG’s independence in 1999, our Vice President, then-Senator Joe Biden, gave the keynote speech and highlighted the ongoing importance and mission U.S. international broadcasting with these words: “The struggle in which media play a critical part is never-ending. That struggle is the fight to protect and promote freedom.”

He continued: “Every day, U.S. international broadcasters provide news and information about America and the world to millions of people living in societies not yet free or that struggle to consolidate recently-won freedoms ... The news that you provide, whether about America or about events in foreign lands, empowers your audiences.”

Today, in Iraq and Afghanistan, VOA and RFE/RL, and our newer broadcasters, Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV, are serving citizens caught up in tribal and sectarian strife and violent extremism.

Being in practice a free, professional press in support of freedom and democracy is the shared mission of all BBG broadcasters.

We know we have succeeded when freedom and democracy have taken hold, as they did during the 1990s across what had been traditional target areas for U.S. international broadcasting – Central and Eastern Europe. That is our long-term desired effect.

En route to this goal, we serve a host of critical functions. These include:

Fostering respect for human rights;

Strengthening civil society, rule of law, and transparency;

Stemming religious and ethnic intolerance;

Combating hate media; and

Communicating what America stands for – our policies, values, and culture.

Our performance measures track our mission and focus on audience reach, news reliability, and audience understanding.

Reaching Afghanistan

U.S. Commander for Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal, has described the current state of affairs in the country in these terms: “The situation in Afghanistan is serious ... We face not only a resilient and growing insurgency; there is also a crisis of confidence among Afghans ...” Effective communication, he argues, is vital to “the operational center of gravity: the continued support of the Afghan people.”

What we at the BBG can say is that we are leveraging all our assets to support the mission of constructively engaging the Afghan people.

VOA and RFE/RL join together in Afghanistan to produce a coordinated 24/7 stream of programming in Dari and Pashto, transmitted via high-powered AM from Kabul and via five local FMs in major cities across the country. There is also cross-border shortwave to ensure a listenable signal nationwide. In addition, VOA broadcasts a daily hour-long TV program in Dari and Pashto over Afghanistan State Television.

RFE/RL and VOA are together the number one broadcasting entity in Afghanistan in audience reach.

VOA plays to its strengths as a U.S.-based broadcaster focused on coverage of news and policy debates concerning Afghanistan taking place in Washington, news in Afghanistan with a strong U.S. angle and regional and international news

RFE/RL stresses its trademark local news coverage, capturing all aspects of the insurgency and micro-reporting on health, education, women’s issues, among other topics at the top of the Afghan people’s news and information agenda.

Showcasing the power of VOA and RFE/RL’s combined reporting was their wall-to-wall coverage of the recent Afghan presidential election.

RFE/RL interviewed all 41 candidates in on-air forums in which Afghan citizens had the opportunity to call in with questions. In an unprecedented development, RFE/RL’s Dari and Pashto service co-hosted with Afghanistan State Television the only presidential election debate that President Hamid Karzai attended. The service director, Akbar Ayazi, served as the debate’s sole moderator.

All in all, RFE/RL allowed listeners throughout Afghanistan to escape personality-based elections and to examine the candidates in the context of the issues of the day.

From Washington, VOA reported on the Obama Administration’s Afghan policy and the positions of members of Congress and other top U.S. officials toward the election. To enhance overall BBG coverage, VOA managing editors traveled to Kabul to report live and co-host call-in shows. VOA stringers added to RFE/RL local reports with coverage from polling stations and locations throughout the country.

Beyond special events coverage such as the Afghan elections, VOA and RFE/RL address every aspect of Afghan life day in and day out.

Among its many programming focus areas, RFE/RL routinely addresses Islam (which research shows is the number one issue for Afghans), the religious implications of suicide bombings and terrorism, and the nature and aims of the Taliban and al-Qaeda – in the station’s commitment to giving the Afghan people a deeper understanding of the conflict in which they are engaged.

Both RFE/RL and VOA closely monitor human rights in Afghanistan. When the Afghan Parliament passed a law restricting the rights of Shia women, VOA TV broadcast a special program featuring both opponents and supporters of the law. Senator Barbara Boxer and Melanne Vermeer, the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues, were among those who participated.

The effect of BBG broadcasting in Afghanistan is that RFE/RL and VOA have won the loyal following of the Afghan people. Together they reach 56% of all Afghan adults (15 years of age and older) every week – a regular audience of nearly 10 million people – surpassing all other media, foreign and domestic.

RFE/RL’s combined Dari and Pashto service is, by itself, the most popular media outlet in the country. It is also the service Afghans say they turn to first for news and information, and the one Afghans said they most preferred for news about the recent elections.

More particularly, though, when we look at whether we are attracting the really hard-to-reach audiences – namely, the insurgents – we see that, on a *daily* basis, RFE/RL and VOA together reach 26% of those who say they strongly oppose the Afghan government.

But BBG impact goes well beyond the numbers. During a recent appearance on a VOA call-in show with the Afghan Minister of Education about new textbooks for Afghan schools, a disabled student called and said he was unable to attend school because he didn’t have a wheelchair. The next day, VOA’s program host got a note from the Afghan Ministry of Education saying it arranged for the caller to receive a wheelchair.

The upshot is this: BBG broadcasters are delivering the goods.

While the insurgency remains a force, it is also true that overwhelmingly Afghans do not support the Taliban, and hold the Taliban accountable for much of the chaos and violence in Afghan society. At the same time, Afghans remain broadly supportive of their government and of U.S. troop presence in the country.

We cannot claim our broadcasts are directly responsible for these attitudes. But we are hard pressed to imagine what the situation in the country would be like without the factual, relevant, and credible reporting RFE/RL and VOA produce.

Broadcasting to Iraq

BBG broadcasters perform an independent but integral role in the overall U.S. mission in Iraq.

Despite abundant media, press freedom in Iraq reflects the country's status as a recovering war zone. Freedom House rates Iraq "not free" and places it 148 out of 195 countries worldwide. Reporters without Borders cites recent improvements for journalists but notes that since 2003 there have been 77 kidnappings, of which 23 ended in murder – including, we sadly recall, two correspondents of RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq. Domestic media tend to be tools of specific Iraqi sects and factions. Independent journalists risk their lives every day.

Our success is reflected in part in huge audiences. Every week, seventy-three (73%) of Iraqi adults – some 9.5 million people – listen to or watch one of the four BBG broadcasters serving the country, including Alhurra TV, Radio Sawa, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq, and VOA Kurdish.

Alhurra is the fourth leading TV channel among hundreds of channels available by satellite and locally with 32% daily, and 64%, weekly reach. It is also among Iraqis' top choices for news and information on TV. Radio Sawa is the most listened-to radio station in Iraq, with 23% weekly reach, and is among Iraqis' top three sources for news on the radio. Radio Free Iraq, with 10% weekly reach, is among the top five radio stations for news. In addition, VOA Kurdish reaches 12% of its target audience weekly.

The challenges have been significant. At the start of the conflict in Iraq, we had no established broadcasting platform in the country – no local facilities, no in-country transmission, no significant national audience. Broad anti-Americanism deepened after the war began, posing significant credibility hurdles. At the same time, Iraqi and foreign media outlets proliferated, intensifying competition.

Our progress has been due principally to three factors. First, we quickly set up local operations, including news bureaus. Second, early on we secured local transmission for both radio and TV, including FM and TV stations in major Iraqi cities – important to Alhurra's early ability to gain market share while satellite dish ownership spread. And third, BBG broadcasters have sustained 24/7 news and information coverage, pegged to developments and issues on the ground in Iraq and in synch with the needs and preferences of Iraqi audiences.

Local presence and feel, excellent domestic distribution, and highly relevant news and other programming – this has been the formula that has won BBG broadcasters their wide Iraqi following.

At the same time, our broadcasters give Iraqis comprehensive regional and international news, including in-depth coverage of U.S. society, culture, and policies. Indeed, reporting on the U.S.

is a competitive advantage for BBG broadcasters with news from Washington on U.S. Iraq policy and plans that are directly relevant to Iraq citizens.

BBG strategy stresses a multi-media approach and leverages the unique strengths of each of the four broadcasters to target discrete Iraqi audience segments with custom-tailored content.

Alhurra Iraq

Most Iraqis get their news from TV, and thus a strong TV presence in Iraq is important for the BBG. Alhurra Iraq is a 24/7 news and information channel, and an off-shoot of the Alhurra network for the broader Middle East. Alhurra Iraq targets Iraqi news-seekers 25 years of age and older with rich local content and coverage of the region and the U.S. from the pan-Arab stream.

More than 30% of Alhurra Iraq's schedule is specific to Iraq, including primetime broadcast hours of 7-10 PM, when the channel's premier newscast, Iraq's news program of record, airs.

Driving Alhurra Iraq's national coverage is its large Baghdad bureau and network of in-country correspondents. They speak the local dialect and intuitively grasp their fellow citizens' hopes and hardships. Their stories can be uniquely empowering:

When the Iraqi government threatened to destroy the homes of Iraqis who lacked property deeds, Alhurra investigated with on-camera interviews of the responsible officials, who then reversed course, sparing thousands from homelessness.

When injured Iraqi soldiers were denied medical care and insurance, Alhurra broke the story, leading to the first-ever Iraqi hospital for wounded veterans.

And, when a young boy lost his parents and his leg in a bombing, Alhurra told his story, prompting Iraq's Minister of Work and Social Affairs to place him in an orphanage with coverage of his medical costs.

Such stories might seem ordinary. But in Iraq, with no tradition of press freedom, they are in fact a glimpse of a nascent Fourth Estate.

Complementing Alhurra Iraq's national coverage is programming from Alhurra's pan-Arab stream that also stretches the boundaries of freedom of speech and tolerance. *Equality* and *Women's Views*, a weekly program, addresses taboo topics like polygamy and spousal abuse. *Eye on Democracy*, also weekly, examines sensitive subjects like Islam and democracy and human rights in the Arab world.

Alhurra's newest innovation – both for the pan-Arab stream and Alhurra Iraq – is *Al Youm* (“Today”), a live, three-hour, daily news magazine that originates simultaneously from Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Washington. Patterned on the popular *Today* show in the U.S. but designed to air in the evening, *Al Youm* combines the latest news from three continents with an

eclectic and engaging mix of health, entertainment, sports, technology, business, and other features.

With every broadcast, *Al Youm* bridges divides among the countries of the region and between the region and the U.S. Indeed, it connects cultures in a way few Arab outlets are disposed to doing. And its multi-sourced reporting offers breadth of coverage seen nowhere else – like a recent news report on Darfur with views of officials in Khartoum and Cairo and a report from Jerusalem on Israel’s program of asylum for Darfurian refugees.

In-depth coverage of the U.S. is built into *Al Youm* and carried forth across the Alhurra network. Alhurra is the only Arabic-language television network with correspondents dedicated to the White House, Congress, Pentagon, and State Department. News reports and in-depth programs like *Inside Washington* provide Iraqi viewers with an unparalleled look at the U.S. political process, including interviews with the figures that impact policy, people as diverse as Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman.

Alhurra’s coverage of the 2008 Presidential elections showcased its U.S. reporting strengths. The network carried live reports and talk shows from the key primary states, wall-to-wall reporting from both Republican and Democratic political conventions, and live coverage of election-day activities and election-night returns.

Commenting on Alhurra’s election coverage, the popular pan-Arab newspaper Al Hayat wrote, “With the heated elections race in the United States, Alhurra distinguished itself as the most professional and active satellite TV channel among all the Arabic-speaking satellite channels ...”

Radio Sawa

Radio Sawa is Alhurra’s companion network, and for Iraq, it also produces a dedicated programming stream that provides comparable Iraq-specific news as well as short information and interactive features tailored to the tastes of young Iraqis and designed specifically for the station’s contemporary Arabic/Western music format.

Radio use overall in Iraq has been declining in recent years in tandem with the rise of TV and as such, most Iraqi radio stations have lost audience. However, Sawa’s listenership has dropped much less than others.

FM Radio is an intimate local medium. Sawa’s local presence and feel have been essential to its staying power. Its transmitter network has grown from one in Baghdad in 2003 to 14 nationwide today. Its music, chosen for its specific appeal to Iraqis, keeps the station’s sound fresh. And its local news originates from the same Baghdad hub that serves Alhurra Iraq.

While Iraqis turn to TV first for news, they also listen to news on the radio. Sawa’s format is meant to attract younger audiences who would not otherwise consume news. And it works.

Extensive research to test what Sawa listeners do when the news comes on reveals that the vast majority either pay equal or greater attention – contrary to the behavior one might expect of young people tuning in first for music.

Attracting and holding audience for the information content is important to maximize the value of programs like Sawa's *Straight to the Point*, which includes interviews with Iraqi decision-makers and senior officials answering questions about the most prominent security, political or social issue of the day.

Indeed, Sawa pushes the envelope on its format to incorporate the maximum amount of value-added content without alienating the audience.

Interaction with the audience plays a key role. Every day, Sawa poses a different question to its audience through its *Sawa Chat* feature on topics such as family life, democracy, the arts, etc. Listeners call in to voice their opinions, and their views are aired throughout the following day.

Sawa Chat exemplifies the open discussion of ideas and creates community around shared views. In doing so, it adds another component to Radio Sawa's profile of a station uniquely Iraq and yet one modeling a free press that conveys a popular, democratic spirit taking hold across Iraq.

Radio Free Iraq

Radio Free Iraq (RFI) is a news and information service focused on Iraq's transition to democracy. It specializes in political reporting to complement the broad-based news and information and mass audience engagement of Alhurra Iraq and Radio Sawa.

Like Radio Sawa, RFI is a local broadcaster in Iraq. It airs 10 hours of programming daily nationwide on its own network of FM transmitters.

Typifying RFI's news reporting has been its coverage of the dispute over Iraq's elections. RFI has been on top of the story, exploring the controversy over "closed" versus "open" party lists, seeking out popular opinion, and covering the debate in parliament.

In a similar vein, RFI's reporters have been deeply engaged in covering the bitter controversy over Iraq's efforts to pass a new oil and gas law. It has looked not only at the problems within Iraq but also the dispute between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government over control of energy resources in northern Iraq. RFI has provided in-depth analysis on the energy issue from some of the best national, regional and international experts.

On this, as with RFI coverage generally, it explains how the leading issues of the day fit into the bigger picture in a way local Iraqi media, with more limited resources and partisan leanings, could not do.

As one director of RFI put it: “In Iraq ... opinions are so intolerant of one another, and there are so many news organizations that belong to political groups and deliver these groups’ political agendas ... We are committed to trying to present as many points of view as we can, and put them in a civilized debate.”

This is RFI’s contribution to the BBG’s aim of empowering audiences and, in turn, to Iraq’s transition to more free and democratic society.

VOA Kurdish

VOA is the only U.S. broadcaster – indeed, the only Western broadcaster – to serve Kurdish-speaking Iraqis (15-20% of the Iraqi population) in their own language. VOA airs four hours daily of programming in both the Sorani and Kurmanji dialects to the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, reaching as well Kurds in neighboring countries of Iran, Turkey, and Syria,

VOA Kurdish provides its target audience with a service tailored to their needs and sensibilities as a minority within greater Iraq. The news is broad-based, covering developments in Iraq, the Middle East, and the world, but reflects Kurdish interests. Programs feature panel discussions with Kurds in the greater Middle East region and in the diaspora. Music is both Kurdish and American.

Novel in the universe of BBG programs is the Kurdish service’s children’s program, *Shining Star*, which addresses topics ranging from the environment to education and hygiene. Kurdish children and their parents from all over the world contact the program to participate.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari have expressed their appreciation to VOA for taking the lead in presenting objective, balanced and comprehensive news and information for Kurdish audiences in the Middle East.

VOA Kurdish is also available via the Internet, and increasingly its stories are redistributed via the Web.

Reaching the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Region

The epicenter of Taliban and Al Qaeda operations lies in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. From there, the Taliban organize and launch offensives against the people of Afghanistan and U.S. and NATO forces. Also from there, they have begun aggressive, routine assaults on key Pakistani targets, including the attack on Pakistan’s military headquarters in Rawalpindi last weekend.

Propaganda plays a major role in the extremists’ campaign for dominance. Indeed, the Taliban aims to project power and control as much as actually to wield power and control. As Admiral

Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff has written, “Each beheading, each bombing and each beating sends a powerful message or, rather, *is* a powerful message.”

Taliban propaganda traffics in lies and outright distortions. Richard Holbrooke, U.S. Special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, has told the story of a Pakistani ambassador kidnapped by the Taliban who challenged his captors in dialogue to show him where in the Koran suicide bombings were justified. When they retrieved a copy, they handed it to him, because they were illiterate. They had heard suicide bombings justified by Taliban propagandists on the radio.

As Ambassador Holbrooke has urged: The insurgents’ propaganda “needs to be dealt with head on. We can’t concede the battle to the Taliban.”

Radio is the dominant medium in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Through radio, the insurgents pour out their disinformation and hate. Radio is the means by which BBG broadcasters can and will counter their propaganda – not with propaganda of a different sort, but with objective, comprehensive journalism that conveys factual, balanced news and information.

BBG broadcasts in Dari and Pashto blanket Afghanistan, and our Urdu programming serves Pakistan nationwide. For the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area, we initiated in 2006 a dedicated service by the Voice of America, in the unique regional Pashto dialect, called *Deewa Radio*.

Deewa focuses on local issues and produces nine hours of daily programming, including live news, current affairs, call-in shows, and music. It transmits via AM, FM, and shortwave, with text and audio available on the Internet. Of the nine hours of programming, three were recently added in a surge to provide a morning program to complement *Deewa*’s nighttime hours.

Data on *Deewa*’s audience from the BBG’s first audience survey in the region are just now coming in. An earlier study by the U.S. Agency for International Development suggested *Deewa* had a wide following. We see robust audience reaction everyday in some 400 listener phone calls to on-air discussion programs.

This initial feedback and other qualitative research indicate that local Pashto speakers, mostly in Pakistan but on the Afghan side of the border as well, seek engagement – they want their voices heard. Certainly the back-drop is Taliban propaganda, but also the relative isolation in which the region’s inhabitants live with little opportunity for political expression. *Deewa* is giving them a voice.

One listener in the Swat valley said *Deewa Radio* was “the only source of information” there. Many listeners in the regions of Waziristan, Swat and Bajaur have told the station that they plan their activities around *Deewa*’s broadcasts.

Key to *Deewa's* success is what has worked so well in Afghanistan – news and information tailored to the audience's needs and interests. The station maintains a network of some 25 local stringers who file a steady stream of reports such topics as the Pakistani military's campaign against Taliban forces and those displaced by Taliban threats or combat.

But it is not only political news that interests the audience. Focus group research in Pakistan among *Deewa* listeners shows they want a broad-based information service that touches on social and cultural issues and developments as well. The research also shows that Pakistanis who otherwise dislike the U.S. will listen to broadcasts under the VOA brand – provided they observe strict objectivity.

Those who are internally displaced as a result of Pakistan's military campaigns against the Taliban also find a voice in *Deewa*. A refugee in the Swabi Mansoor camp said during a recent program, "If *Deewa* was not here, (we, refugees) would have been disgraced, destroyed, unknown to the world. It is *Deewa* which talks about (our) problems ..."

As a result of their uncompromising reporting, VOA stringers have been repeatedly threatened by Taliban militants – and some of the threats have been realized.

In July, the home of VOA *Deewa* reporter Rahman Bunairee was blown up by men declaring their allegiance to the Taliban and claiming retaliation against reporting by VOA. Mr. Bunairee escaped to Islamabad and eventually to the U.S., where we now hope to continue his service to *Deewa*.

Deewa has done and will continue to do its excellent work. With the rise in the insurgency and its increased propaganda efforts, however, further BBG support for broadcasting to Afghanistan-Pakistan border region is on its way.

Earlier this year, to complement *Deewa*, Congress endorsed new RFE/RL Pashto broadcasts for the border region. Working in cooperation with Voice of America's *Radio Deewa*, the new *Radio Azadi* will broadcast 6 hours daily. With reporters on both sides of the border and throughout Pakistan, and with a bureau, security permitting, in Peshawar or another city, the new service will reach out and begin to combat the radical broadcasting in Pakistan.

Once fully operational, *Azadi* will have the capacity to send headlines and breaking news to listeners via mobile phones and SMS text messages. Cell phone ownership is widespread in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and while less so in the border region, the new text messaging capacity will nonetheless let the BBG engage people well beyond the reach of insurgent broadcasters.

We at the BBG are deeply aware of what is at stake across Afghanistan and Pakistan and are committed to ensuring that the people of the region have continuous access to timely and

accurate news about the events around them. Through our dedicated services, we provide the antidote to the violent messages and lies of the insurgency.

Conclusion

BBG broadcasters are an independent yet integral part of a global U.S. government communication effort that seeks to advance U.S. national interests. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, there are scores of State and DoD public diplomacy and strategic communication activities. And yet U.S. international broadcasting has a distinct niche – objective journalism.

Our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has yielded important lessons for broadcasting effectiveness. First, we play a critical role in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan that lack adequate press freedom and credible alternative media. Second, we succeed when (a) we deliver the news our audiences want and need to make informed judgments about their societies, and (b) we deliver our content via the media our audiences prefer and can easily access.

This is a simple formula but one that requires deft, professional execution.

At the end of the day, to recall the words of Vice President Biden at the commemoration of the BBG's independence in 1999, what we seek is to empower our audiences in their struggle for freedom and democracy.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, our objective journalism arms our audiences against fear-mongering and propaganda of sectarianism and violent extremism. Consistent truth telling will, over time, trump fear and propaganda.

We would be happy to answer any questions you might have.