

Testimony of
Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, Chairman
Broadcasting Board of Governors
Before the
Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism
Committee on Foreign Relations
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, we greatly appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about the efforts of the Broadcasting Board of Governors to communicate with the people in the Islamic world. I am joined by fellow board member Norman Pattiz, the father of Radio Sawa and an irrepressible force for international broadcasting, and by Mouafac Harb, the News Director for the Middle East Television Network. Together we hope to give you a full picture of the BBG's efforts to assist the war on terrorism, and become a continuously available source of news for the people of the Middle East.

As this Committee well knows, the BBG has greatly expanded its reach and broadcast hours to the Islamic world in the past three years. There has been literally an enormous increase in the availability of U.S.-sponsored news and information on radio and television to this region. Radio Sawa, Radio Farda, VOA-TV's Persian programming, and now the Middle East Television Network (MTN) are relative newcomers on the scene, but are making a big impact.

On February 14 of this year, with the enthusiastic support of President Bush and key leaders of the Administration and Congress, the BBG launched its new Arabic-language television network called "Alhurra" ("The Free One" in Arabic). Even before this station went on the air, it was heavily criticized in the Arab world as a propaganda arm of the U.S. Government. It has been called a "voice of the CIA" whose aim is to "brainwash Arabs" and described as part of "a long-term plan to dominate the minds and ideas of Iraqis and Arabs". But Alhurra is none of these things. Its mission is that of all U.S. international broadcasting – to promote and sustain freedom and democracy by broadcasting accurate and objective news and information about the United States and the world.

Through its adherence to Western journalistic standards, through its objective, accurate reporting, Alhurra can gain the credibility we need to build an audience and offer Middle Eastern audiences a new balanced view of world events. While criticism in the Arab press continues, we are connecting with the people – our target audience – and they are sending us hundreds of e-mails to welcome us. “You are much needed to balance biased news controlled by those full of hatred to western world,” reads one. “This is the first step to fight the ‘hate culture’ that feeds terrorism,” says another. “I hope your channel [will help] our Arab brothers . . . to tell the truth from all that is going on.”

In a little more than four months, the BBG established a state-of-the-art broadcast facility in Northern Virginia to house Alhurra. Since October some 900,000 feet of cable have been installed in this facility. But what is truly extraordinary is the sea of Middle Eastern faces – newsmen and newswomen – enthusiastically working to make this network a successful model of journalistic standards. Many of these individuals are well known media figures in the Middle East and gave up promising careers overseas to practice journalism with MTN.

President Bush spoke of “open debate” and “truth” when he described what this network can mean to the people of the Middle East. The network will challenge the voices of hate and repression with truth and the voices of tolerance and moderation. Viewers will witness free and open discussions, not just about conflict in the Middle East, but also about subjects critical to that region’s future – economic development, human rights and respect for minorities.

Our competitive edge in the Middle East is our dedication to truth and free and open debate. We will provide an example of democracy and a free press in a media market dominated by sensationalism and distortion. That is also the basis for the success of the Voice of America’s new Persian-language satellite television program “News and Views” to the people of Iran. Less than three months after that program was launched last summer, one independent survey showed “News and Views” was reaching a remarkable 12 percent of the country’s over-18 population.

Typical of what creative broadcasting can do is the new segment launched by “News and Views” called “Your Voice.” Iranian viewers were invited to submit e-mails on the controversy surrounding the February 20th

parliamentary elections – from the banning of candidates to calls for an election boycott. We opened a dialogue that is allowing Iranians to share their views with other Iranians – and the response has been extraordinary.

My predecessors likewise brought innovation to our radio broadcasts that proved to be vital to the success of our Afghan Radio Network which broadcasts in Dari and Pashto, our youth-oriented Radio Farda to Iran, and Radio Sawa to the Arab world. When Norm Pattiz was in the process of creating Radio Sawa, he traveled throughout the Middle East to negotiate heretofore unattainable agreements for American AM and FM transmitters in Middle Eastern countries so that we could be heard on the radios of choice in the region.

Radio Sawa has been a phenomenal success. A survey by ACNielsen research last fall demonstrated that Sawa has achieved market dominance – an average listenership of 42 percent in the important age group between 15 and 29 – in key Middle Eastern countries.

Radio Sawa faced the same skepticism as Alhurra before it was launched. Critics conceded Arabs might listen to our music, but not our news. Yet this same ACNielsen survey found that, in a region where skepticism towards the U.S. is high and boycotts of U.S. products are common, Radio Sawa was found to be a reliable source of news and information by 73 percent of its weekly listenership.

In a matter of months, Sawa built the largest radio news-gathering operation in the Middle East presenting up-to-the minute news 24 hours a day and over 325 newscasts per week. It was the very reliability of our Sawa news that made us the leading source for news in Iraq even as we went to war there.

News also accounts for the surprising audience that ACNielsen documented for Sawa among older listeners in target countries in the Middle East – better than 20 percent among the general population over 30. Mr. Chairman, I will submit for the record highlights of this survey.

Under the leadership of Mouafac Harb, Sawa's outstanding News Director who also assumes that post for Alhurra, the station also is the source of a host of shows that explore freedom and democracy.

In Indonesia, the Voice of America has enhanced its radio and TV offerings to reach this large Islamic population. “Jurnal VOA,” a 25-minute live, interactive news program, appears on Indonesia’s “Metro TV.” Another TV offering, “Doing Business,” airs every Monday on TVRI. “VOA Direct Connection,” a half-hour weekly radio program, airs each Friday evening on more than 40 satellite affiliates around Indonesia.

This month, we launched a new one-hour interactive talk show, “Salam VOA,” that will air on JTV in Surabaya. In addition, VOA will supply Trans TV with a weekly 5-minute U.S. election wrap-up, to air on its morning news program. We anticipate doubling our radio broadcasts to five hours a day and increasing TV from one to five hours a week.

The Board’s latest initiative is a new youth-oriented Urdu broadcast to Pakistan where listeners would be served contemporary Pakistani and western music along with news and current affairs features and subjects ranging from education to business to health. We hope to increase our hours of broadcast as well as the power of our broadcasts to this key country in the war on terrorism.

Just this week we began broadcasting to Iraq over channel 12 in Baghdad, available through terrestrial transmission. Iraqis also have access to Alhurra’s programming delivered via Arabsat. In the weeks ahead, we will be phasing in special programming for Iraq, including newscasts, talk shows and roundtables. Additional terrestrial transmitters in Basra and three other cities should be on-line in the near future.

Much of criticism of Alhurra – again before we even launched – was that we would be the mouthpiece of the U.S. Government, sending cleared messages and propaganda to taint Arab minds. None of our programming in any part of the world seeks to do this. VOA’s long-standing Charter, and more recently the U.S. International Broadcasting Act, guard against this. But we must demonstrate this every day to our audiences and earn their trust and loyalty over time. This does not mean that we ignore our mission to promote and sustain freedom and democracy. Our programming frequently features U.S. policymakers and programming that accurately explains the U.S. policy measures that so often are maligned in the Middle East.

In continuing all of our broadcast initiatives, we will strive to give our listeners the same tool we have always provided through international

broadcasting: the information they need to compare their political, economic, and social systems to those that exist elsewhere in the world, and to assess their own leadership.

In creating a broadcast environment that also reflects the foreign policy priorities of the United States, we look to the Department of State for guidance, expertise, and participation in our programs. I have served four Administrations in Washington – all of them connected with international broadcasting. Never have I seen a better working relationship between the White House, the State Department, and international broadcasting.

The White House Office of Global Communications has been extraordinarily supportive in helping us assess priorities and expand what we are doing as in Middle East Television. This office also has been a major enabler in helping the BBG to gain access to policy makers for interviews on major world events.

Under Secretary Margaret Tutwiler, who represents the Secretary at Board meetings, has been deeply interested in broadcasting's strategic goals and priorities and is a full participant in Board decision-making. Our diplomats overseas also have helped us gain valuable transmission resources in countries to which we broadcast.

We need to understand the importance of maintaining the strength of public diplomacy and the traditions of international broadcasting. I am convinced that we will not be successful in our overall mission of delivering our message to the world if we fail to grasp that these are two different spheres and that they operate according to two different sets of rules.

It is very important that government spokesmen take America's message to the world – passionately and relentlessly. We should not be ashamed of public advocacy on behalf of freedom and democracy and the United States of America. International broadcasting, on a parallel and complementary track, is called upon to reflect the highest standards of independent journalism as the best means of demonstrating to international audiences that truth is on the side of democratic values.

Thirty years ago, RFE/RL and VOA began broadcasting the Watergate hearings. Those broadcasts caused heartburn for many in Washington, but looking back we see they constituted a veritable civics lesson on the

importance of separation of powers and rule of law. Over the years I have heard so many citizens of post-communist countries tell how those broadcasts helped them understand the real meaning of freedom and democracy. Alhurra is fortunate to make its debut in a Presidential election year. It will cover the U.S. race from one end to the other, showing day by day how our election process works.

We in America are fortunate that telling the truth works to our long-term advantage. That is why international broadcasting is so important to this country.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my formal statement. I will be happy to answer any questions that your Subcommittee might have.