

## **Comments on Radio Sawa and al Hurra Television**

William A. Rugh

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I would like to make some comments on Radio Sawa and al Hurra television as seen by Arab audiences. These comments are based on recent conversations and observations and a study of the history of Arab broadcasting. First I will describe the Arab broadcasting context into which Radio al Sawa and al Hurra television were introduced, and then I will cite some Arab reactions to both of them.

### The Arab Broadcasting Context

Almost all radio and television systems in the Arab world developed under the direct ownership and control of Arab governments. While there were some private Arab newspapers, radio and TV were government operations. Most Arab broadcasting laws prohibited criticism of the head of state, defamation of religion, or undermining public order. Additional taboos were observed by broadcast editors based on local custom and political circumstances. Arab broadcast audiences therefore had access only to news and commentary officially approved by their respective governments, unless they could tune in to the Voice of America, BBC, Radio Monte Carlo or CNN. The content of Arab radio and television broadcasts was generally pretty unimaginative and boring because there was no real competition in Arabic. This situation prevailed throughout the Arab world until the early 1990s.

Then a revolution in television broadcasting occurred, as private Arab satellite television channels were established in Europe that transmitted programs in Arabic to all Arab countries. Why did this happen? In 1991, when CNN provided 24/7 coverage of Desert Storm, Arabs saw the possibility of instantaneous live coverage of dramatic regional events, that satellite technology and cheaper satellite receiving dishes had made possible. But they regarded the CNN broadcasts as American in news selection and commentary, and Arab entrepreneurs began to think about the possibility of satellite television in Arabic and edited from an Arab point of view. Wealthy private investors from Saudi Arabia, and then others, started Arab satellite television stations whose programs were intended for a pan-Arab market.

The new satellite television channels broadcast news, public affairs programs and commentary, along with other content including entertainment, much of it Hollywood movies or programs purchased from American commercial television. But there were two aspects of these new channels that made their impact on Arab broadcasting revolutionary. One was that they began to cover important regional news events more professionally and more effectively, having correspondents on the scene reporting live, and even entering previously off-limits areas like Israel to get the news. The second innovation was to present discussions of sensitive topics from different points of view that broke previous taboos.

The pioneer in these innovations was al Jazeera Television, based in Qatar. Al Jazeera was and is financed by the government of Qatar, but it is radically different from the traditional government-controlled television channels that dominated the Arab world until 1991. The government of Qatar allowed al Jazeera to cover news in Israel and Afghanistan that had never before been covered by Arab TV channels, and it allowed al Jazeera to broadcast talk shows in which views were expressed that had never before been heard on Arab television, because the channels had been so tightly controlled by their respective governments. Al Jazeera carried talk shows on which Islamic fundamentalists debated with secularists, feminists argued for more women's rights, and opposition political spokesmen criticized specific governments by name. These talk shows pleased audiences but they angered officials in other Arab countries, and at one time or another, virtually every Arab government has protested al Jazeera and taken action against it, including expelling its correspondents. Some taboos still existed but many were broken. The Government of Qatar seems to have taken pride in allowing al Jazeera to poke other Arab governments in the eye, perhaps to attract attention to this tiny country. Whatever the

reason, other Arab satellite channels, even the ones developed by other governments such as Abu Dhabi, have to some extent imitated al Jazeera by improving their regional news coverage and making their public affairs programming more lively and interesting.

The news and public affairs programs on these channels seem to many Westerners to have a strong anti-American bias. Criticism of American policy is frequently expressed on talk shows in al Jazeera and other channels, and news reports are edited differently from news reports on American TV, often showing American actions in a negative light. Some of this is deliberately anti-American editing, especially for example on Hizbollah's al Manar channel. But much of what appears to Americans as anti-American is primarily motivated by the desire of editors at al Jazeera and other channels to satisfy the Arab market. There is today widespread criticism in the Arab world of American policy in the Middle East, and Arab television reflects that. Moreover, there is a cultural bias in Arab television, just as there is a cultural bias for example in American television, or British television. Thus when one American is killed in Iraq, that is priority news in US television but not necessarily on Arab television. Conversely, when a Palestinian civilian is killed in the West Bank, that usually is priority news on Arab television but not necessarily here.

Today the Arab television viewer with a satellite dish has a choice of dozens of channels. But like most TV viewers around the world, the Arab television viewer tends to watch, at most, only six or seven of them in a given week. Typically an avid television viewer might watch al Jazeera, al Arabiya or Arab News Network for round-the clock coverage of news and public affairs; Middle East Broadcasting, Orbit, Arab Radio and Television or Lebanese Broadcasting Company International for entertainment including Western and Arab programs; the Hizbollah channel al Manar for aggressive pro-Palestinian commentary and news; plus the local TV channel for local news. There are many choices.

#### Radio Sawa and al Hurra Television

This is the environment into which Radio Sawa and al Hurra television have been introduced. What has been the impact? I will report some Arab perceptions, since in the world of ideas, perceptions are often as important as reality. These comments are based on anecdotal information, not a formal survey.

##### Radio Sawa.

Young audiences who are able to hear Radio Sawa seem to like its mix of Arabic and Western music, and it has achieved some popularity just as Radio Monte Carlo had decades earlier. But Arab adults I have spoken with told me that they much prefer BBC Arabic Radio, because BBC carries much more interesting and useful news about the region and the world, and they regard BBC as relatively objective. Some of the people who used to listen to the Voice of America in Arabic now listen to BBC instead of Radio Sawa.

Secondly, audibility is important. The Voice of America Arabic Service, which has been replaced by Radio Sawa, was limited in its effectiveness because it was not audible on medium wave throughout the area. BBC and Radio Monte Carlo had stronger medium wave signals so they were more successful. Now Radio Sawa has some new transmitter access and this has helped it considerably. But in important countries where it is not audible, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Radio Sawa too is ineffective.

Third, and importantly, Radio Sawa is regarded as a U.S. government sponsored station. Arab listeners are experienced in detecting who is behind a given broadcaster, and they sensed that the news and public affairs programs were sponsored by the American government. The "firewall" that the Broadcasting Board of Governors speaks of, separating Radio Sawa from State Department policy, was not seen or appreciated by Arab listeners. They simply accepted Radio Sawa as another government radio station.

Radio Sawa has some potential, but rather than focusing on entertainment that Arab

audiences can get elsewhere, I believe it should focus on providing the kind of news and public affairs programs that Arab audiences, including adults, want. Audience surveys should not only measure audience share but compare Radio Sawa against other radio stations at moments in which there is an important news event, such as the finding of Saddam Hussain or a Presidential news conference. If Radio Sawa can increase its coverage of the listening area, and take advantage of the fact that it is regarded as a US Government station by broadcasting more about American policies in the region and the American public's views of those policies, it should have a greater impact.

#### Al Hurra Television.

Al Hurra Television has had a much more difficult time penetrating the Arab market than Radio Sawa, because the radio market was not very competitive, while the Arab television market was highly saturated with channels that Arab audiences found interesting.

First, like Radio Sawa, al Hurra was assumed to be a U.S. Government broadcaster. The "firewall" was not recognized. This assumption was confirmed by Arab viewers in several ways. The content and style of the news gave the impression that it was not an Arab channel but American. Subjects that were chosen, and the time devoted to them in newscasts, seemed determined from an American point of view rather than an Arab perspective. More attention was paid to Americans in the news than to Arabs in the news. Language also did not match that of most Arab television stations; for example Palestinian suicide bombers were not referred to as "martyrs." Most importantly, the first impression viewers got of al Hurra - and first impressions are important - was the inaugural interview with President Bush. Arab government-owned television stations have always given prominence to statements by their heads of state, and the Bush interview seemed to stamp al Hurra as just one more government-owned channel.

Secondly, and relatedly, a common Arab reaction that I have heard is disappointment that al Hurra is not effective as a newsgathering agency in the Middle East. Arab viewers seeking news about what is happening inside Falluja today turn to al Jazeera and al Arabiya, because al Hurra is not providing reporting as good as theirs. Arab viewers assumed that since the United States is the occupying power in Iraq, and al Hurra is the American government's television channel, al Hurra should be in the best position of any broadcaster to have the best and quickest access to news events in Iraq, but it does not. Al Hurra's potential advantage in this competitive market has been lost.

More generally, Arab viewers tell me they are surprised that al Hurra does not cover in more depth stories related to the Middle East that are important to Arab viewers. They say that often al Hurra gives a story on the Middle East short shrift and turns to a cooking show while the other Arab channels continue detailed coverage.

Third, another common reaction that I have heard from Arab viewers of al Hurra was disappointment that it has been weak in its coverage of the American domestic scene. Arab viewers have become accustomed to watching the US-based correspondents of al Jazeera, al Arabiya, Abu Dhabi and other Arab television channels covering developments in the United States, often with live reports, in Arabic. Arab viewers who understand English also have access to ABC, CBS and NBC news and current events. They expected al Hurra to cover the US domestic scene much better, more comprehensively and more professionally than anything they had seen before, but al Hurra seemed weak by comparison. For example, they turned to al Jazeera for a recent live broadcast by President Bush because al Hurra did not cover it live.

Fourth, another disappointment expressed by Arab viewers is that they expected al Hurra to be aggressively supporting democracy and human rights, but they say it has failed to live up to that expectation. The context is important here. Many Arab viewers have been critical of their own governments for failure to move in the direction of democratization, an end to corruption, or to protect the human rights of their citizens. The revolution that has taken place in Arab television broadcasting has opened up debate on many issues that were previously taboo, but there are still

some taboos relating to internal domestic politics that remain. For example, when Saad al Din Ibrahim went to jail in Egypt, Egyptian media did not rally to his defense. Other human rights activists in other Arab countries are in jail or being mistreated but the Arab media are not raising their cases. Since President Bush has been calling for democratization and an end to corruption in the Arab world and he has specifically mentioned Arab governments that should undertake reforms, Arab audiences hoped and expected that al Hurra would amplify this policy and focus on domestic reforms that are needed in Arab countries.

Some Arab viewers believe that al Hurra avoids taking up Arab domestic reform cases out of deference to Arab governments, and refuses to raise sensitive domestic issues. For example, when Tunisian President Ben Ali was in Washington recently, it is widely believed that al Hurra accepted the Tunisian demand that in an interview with the Tunisian Foreign Minister, the question of Tunisia's human rights abuses not be included. Al Hurra therefore looks like any other government-owned channel that respects Arab taboos.

Finally, Arab regular viewers of al Hurra tell me that the tone and style of the broadcasts lack pan-Arab balance. They assume from the names and accents of the presenters that most of them are Lebanese Christians, and they wonder about the absence of broadcast professionals from the Gulf, for example. Arab viewers are always sensitive to identification of the individuals by nationality, tribe and religion, so this is an important factor in creating the al Hurra image.

In conclusion, Radio Sawa may have some potential if it improves its content, and tries some of the effective programming that VOA Arabic used over the years. However, as for al Hurra, it has entered a very competitive market and the first impression that it has made has disappointed many viewers. It was to be expected that those implacably hostile to America would criticize al Hurra no matter what it did, but it is telling that the specific comments mentioned here have come essentially from America's friends in the region who want us to succeed and be understood. My conclusion is that while it is still too early to be sure, early indications are that al Hurra cannot succeed in this very competitive market.

Something urgently needs to be done to help bridge the great gap between American and Arab perceptions. We are in a serious war of ideas. My recommendation is that it would be more cost-effective to devote the funds used for television broadcasting to other badly needed public diplomacy programs. The most effective public diplomacy for Arab audiences involves dialogue by Americans willing to listen and able to explain the United States and its policies. Instead of trying to manage our own television channel, we should do more to gain access to the existing Arab channels, and we should increase the number of trained professional officers with Arabic language capabilities who can explain America and its policies using Arab media. The 9/11 terrorists used our planes to kill our people. We should be able to use Arab media to inform and educate Arab audiences.