



Radio Sawa: America's new adventure in radio broadcasting¹

By Sam Hilmy

May, 2007. In April 2002, the U.S. Government launched an audacious new Arabic language radio station aimed at the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The round-the-clock broadcasts, oddly dubbed Radio Sawa, replaced at a single stroke the respected brand name of the Voice of America's Arabic Service, which had for over a half century, in war and peace, provided the region with comprehensive full service programming.

A predominantly pop music service designed to appeal to youth, Sawa was established at the behest of American commercial media mogul Norman Pattiz who, until his resignation at the end of 2006, was a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an independent U.S. federal agency. The BBG oversees all non-military U.S. Government-funded broadcast outlets. To run the new station, the BBG under Chairman Kenneth Tomlinson (a former chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, editor of *Reader's Digest* and director of the VOA who also recently abandoned his government position under a cloud of criticism for mismanagement) founded and funded

the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), a non-profit corporation. MBN also operates Sawa's younger twin Arabic TV satellite channel Alhurra.

Mr. Tomlinson has publicly described his friend and colleague Mr. Pattiz as "the father of Radio Sawa." After the station was launched, Mr. Pattiz described it in a public forum in ecstatic terms: "It sounded so different and it was so appealing—because it really sounds like a Western contemporary music station, a pop station."

Sawa's Mission

Like any successful big-time business executive, Mr. Pattiz commissioned a survey and "a lot of advance research" before embarking on the costly, large-scale project of a 24/7 Arabic language radio station. The Middle East survey results, according to him, showed three things: (a) "over 60 percent of the population ... is under the age of 30," (b) "the indigenous media, especially radio ... everything was pretty dull and pretty drab, and it sounded like government radio," and (c) "people were interested in something that didn't sound like government radio." Mr. Pattiz decided that this was what businessmen call "the hole in the marketplace." In order to fill this "hole" with his product, Radio Sawa, he needed ample sources of cash and the most modern broadcast facilities to reach the audience with a clear signal. The new station cost the American taxpayer \$34 million in its first year. He secured clear FM transmission to most Arab countries and a powerful medium wave to the rest. The VOA's Arabic Service cost the

U.S. Government less than \$5 million annually and transmitted its programs on a limited medium wave and a few short waves at the time it was replaced by Sawa.

Mr. Pattiz described his new station's mission as "... reporting the news straight up and letting the listeners ...decide for themselves." He said that in addition to Sawa's journalistic mission, it aspires to be "an example of a free press in the American tradition." He added: "We generally play an Arabic pop song followed by a Western pop song. And then we'll have news, five to ten minutes in length, twice an hour, with headlines at the top and bottom of the hour."

Program Components

Sawa's constant on-air slogan boasts about "the loveliest tunes and the latest news." It never identifies itself as an American station or where it broadcasts from. Its round-the-clock airtime is divided into roughly 20 percent news and 80 percent pop music. Everything the listener hears other than the music is called *The World Now*. This rubric encompasses the presentation of hard news, light news, bromide and topical features and interviews, sports and so forth. The only exception is a daily 30-minute news program called *Iraq and the World*, half of which is rerun an hour later. No news-related material ever interrupts, or is incorporated within, the music portion—no matter how urgent the breaking news. Sawa does not carry discrete, identifiable "programs"

with distinct titles, individual star talent and performers, music themes and thematic focus. No news "bulletins" are heard alerting listeners to momentous world events.

Unlike its plethora of field reporters and stringers, the station's studio readers, anchor persons and host announcers are never identified by name. This anonymity applies to the readers of widely scattered promos outside the news portions, plugging for Sawa, its website and (since February 2004) its sister TV channel Alhurra.

News Content

Contrary to Mr. Pattiz's claim, Sawa never carries heads at the top and bottom of the hour. It provides news only twice every hour, usually five minutes every quarter after the hour and a minute or two of headlines every quarter before the hour. The five-minute segments are variously called "newscast" or "full newscast" or "detailed newscast." The headlines are always presented as "summary." The full-length news may occasionally run up to 10, 15 or even 30 minutes, as in the exceptional case of the daily "Iraq and the World." Therefore, I would estimate that the station provides between 7 and 17 minutes of world news per hour. A fair and generous average would then be 10 minutes per hour, which brings the total news time in a 24-hour cycle to 240 minutes. This is less than half the 600-minute daily claim made by Sawa officials in media interviews.

All "full newscasts" begin with three to four headlines, which sometimes pose a confusing problem for listeners: the first headline may not necessarily be a reference to the first item in the body of the newscast, or an opening head is interrogatively formulated in a misleading and tabloidish style that does not accurately or fully reflect the substance of the news item itself. Another news-related inconsistency has to do with repeating the main headlines or the lead head at the conclusion of newscasts, and how to close a news program. Sawa's newsreaders seem to follow their own whims in this regard. In fact, some readers do not even close before the studio engineer plays the usual taped lead-out, "We relay the event to you in sound so you can form a complete picture." The headline news always ends with a prerecorded exhortation: "Stay in touch with the world—(through) *The World Now*." At times even these lead-outs are skipped before moving on to the pop songs.

A more serious problem that plagues Sawa's news handling goes to the core of evaluating priorities and exercising professional judgment regarding the relative significance of world events. Most and sometimes all news stories in one newscast are jettisoned in favor of another set of items in the next news presentation an hour later. This is done with shocking disregard for news value or breaking news. Rarely does a listener hear major stories repeated from hour to hour after proper updating or rewriting to freshen up the next program. Such a cavalier approach to news material distorts the overall picture of world happenings for the vast majority of listeners who normally zero in on specific time slots instead of staying glued to a station all day. Sawa's practice also

reflects ignorance of what should constitute a day's major news leads. There are always major news developments that require coverage in more than just one newscast.

Although on rare occasions a listener would hear a flawless, impeccable, rich and seamless newscast with a perfect lineup, ample voice actualities and anchor confidence, the more prevalent practice gives listeners a messy picture of thematic and topical chaos. Related items on one event can be separated by several unrelated items. Big news developments on tragic events can be used as closers and, conversely, a light routine item or a local insignificant item may be given a prominent place in a newscast. Almost any news development can be used by Sawa as a lead. On a day full of important news, Sawa leads one newscast with a Jordanian government announcement that Amman has not decided whether to resume commercial flights to Baghdad. The lead story of another newscast quotes the London Daily *The Independent* as saying that the Bush administration had advance knowledge of the 9/11 attack, but no official American response is provided to give the story balance and context. An hour later the station drops the item altogether.

Covering Iraq

Let's now turn our attention to a major news story of global significance that has preoccupied the world media for more than four years—the invasion and occupation of Iraq—and track Sawa's treatment of it.

When American and British forces launched their air and ground offensives in the spring of 2003, practically the whole world was calling this pre-emptive military action an “invasion” of a sovereign nation. Yet the word “invasion” disappeared from Sawa's lexicon. When Baghdad fell and the US-led coalition settled down to run the country, the entire world (including the United Nations, the media and even the Bush administration) admitted it was an “occupation”. Yet Sawa's broadcasts avoided the word “occupation” like the plague and rarely referred to Iraqi civilian victims of air raids and other military operations. When anarchy, lawlessness and looting engulfed Iraq after the regime change, the American station continued to beam its customary pop songs and perfunctory news that lacked in-depth coverage and responsible discussion. The looting and devastation prompted Dr. Robert Darnton, professor of European history at Princeton University, to tell *The Washington Post*: "As many have remarked, the Mongol invasion of A.D. 1258 resulted in less damage to Iraqi civilization than the American invasion of 2003." Sawa's news coverage, however, had no time for such views of events.

A few months into the occupation, America's first head of the postwar mission in Iraq, retired general Jay Garner was unceremoniously replaced with Ambassador Paul Bremer. The new top administrator quickly started running the vanquished country by decree: he disbanded the Iraqi army, banned the Baath party and fired all its members from government jobs, closed down most of the country's industries, and appointed his favorite Iraqis to the new Governing Council. These momentous developments and their dire consequences for both occupier and occupied received scant, superficial treatment

from Sawa. The station was busy focusing on President Bush's rosy predictions and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld's unreal statements that "stuff happens" and America "will not impose a government on Iraq." In the meantime, former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan's special envoy to Baghdad Lakhdar Brahimi publicly described Bremer as the new "dictator of Iraq... Nothing happens without his agreement." But Sawa was telling its listeners about the great help Brahimi was giving "the Coalition" to prepare Iraq for a democratic future. And the station's field reporters initially maintained complete silence about the torture and shocking abuses inside Abu Ghraib prison of which Iraqis were already aware (through word of mouth and complaints by international human rights organizations) long before the American TV program *60 Minutes* broke the news.

Eventually, as the situation in Iraq deteriorated, Radio Sawa expanded its coverage with the inauguration of a 30-minute daily program called *Iraq and the World* at 10:15 PM Baghdad time, and a 15-minute version an hour later. This news and opinion roundup does neither Iraq nor the United States a favor, and should perhaps be called *Iraq and Iraq*, because the rest of the world is non-existent in it—except for a fleeting and parochial reference. It also suffers from the same shortcomings of all Sawa news programs. Quality control is very poor. The program airs dozens of voiced news pieces and long interviews from field reporters around the country without evaluating, auditing, double-checking and editing them in advance. The results: poor or contradictory sourcing, outdated information, unprofessional language and duplicated material. The show also suffers from lack of preplanning and a chaotic format, allowing airtime to become a platform for emotional, unrestrained views. Any major news story that is not

Iraq-related is either completely ignored or marginalized. A good example is hurricane Katrina which devastated New Orleans and the Gulf coast of the U.S. in 2005. Even the Israel-Lebanese Hizbollah war in the summer of 2006 received only inadequate and indirect mention with no reportage about the intense fighting or world reaction.

Sound and Music

Sawa uses an impressive number of voices on the air, both male and female, as studio talent and field reporters. The professional quality of their delivery and their mastery of broadcast language, however, are very uneven, ranging from the highly effective and convincing to the very poor, from the smooth and natural to the awkward and halting, from the authoritative and pleasant to the pompous and pretentious. The impact of these voices on and receptivity by the listeners, therefore, vary widely and depend to a large extent on matching each to the reading assignment he or she is given. Aside from field reporters, performers are kept anonymous and the gifted stars among them are not optimally utilized as a tool to build up faithful fans of specific program features.

Music is used thematically by Sawa to identify the news. The theme for newscasts is satisfactory and utilitarian but somewhat pedestrian and, after a few weeks of listening, becomes tiresome to the ear. The theme for the summaries is annoying, distracting and overdramatic. It is held for the length of the summary and the level is brought up deafeningly between individual headlines. Some music stingers² are also

used in a post-modern video game digital-age fashion to accompany echo chamber promos or sloganeering catch phrases. The latter include such things as, "You listen to us, we listen to you," or, "From the ocean to the gulf, we are Sawa (i.e., together)." At times the station mentions its Web site or a telephone number or a few soundbites from listeners in praise of Sawa or expressing opinions on some innocuous or provocative subject.

There is minimal use of the sophisticated craft of radio production to enhance program impact. Rarely does a listener feel truly moved by a smooth forward flow of broadcast material. Nor does one always feel comfortable with the timing and placement of recorded inserts and promos. The station seems to have difficulty matching style to substance, harmonizing sound with words, utilizing a production device to enhance the effect of a program on a target audience living in non-Anglo-Saxon cultural environment.

Pop Songs

This is a programming area that consumes about 80 percent of Sawa's airtime. It should logically deserve a commensurate level of attention, talent and resources. Yet after listening to endless hours of alternating Arabic and so-called "Western" pop songs, and trying to deduce some coherent, professional whole, we discover what a neglected, drifting wasteland all this airtime is. Some egregious weaknesses are: The music portions have no detectable character, personality or identity. The hourly segmentations cannot even be properly described as "programs" because they lack beginning and end that define the nature and flavor of the contents. Nobody is in charge, and there is no star

quality talent who might act as a guide to the listeners through the various component parts. Almost none of the artists and songs are identified. No informative narrative is ever provided to enlighten us about the types of songs played, the dates of issuance, the extent of their popularity and other distinguishing facts. Talk interruptions come without artful, smooth transition flow or thematic unity. In the transition from one song to the next, there is more often than not a definite jarring clash in rhythm, melody, tone, lyrical connotation, voice quality and vocal range. Clocking groups of songs in any music period seems to receive little attention from producers and programmers. As a result, when time comes for *The World Now* and the last song has to be faded for the news introduction cartridge, the ending is frequently mishandled by cutting off in the middle of unfinished lyrics.

Illusion and Reality

The founders of Sawa were convinced from the outset that, in order for their new broadcasting project to accomplish a successful reach to Arab audiences by "marrying the mission to the market," they needed to separate the station from the Voice of America. The latter's mandate was too strict and broad for them. The VOA was required to adhere to its Charter, enacted into law decades earlier, whose operative paragraphs are:

(1) VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective and comprehensive.

(2) VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of American thought and institutions.

(3) VOA will present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussion and opinions on those policies.

To be sure, Sawa officials continued in their promotional material to pay lip service to their commitment "to broadcasting accurate, timely and relevant news about the Middle East, the world and the United States, to the highest standards of journalism, as well as the free marketplace of ideas, respect for the intelligence and culture of its audiences, and a style that is upbeat, modern and forward-looking." But their real objective was to attract the Arab World's "youthful population" with pop songs and keep them tuned to the station. In terms of current affairs content, Sawa has never attempted to focus adequately on anything but parochial backyard Arab news which marginalizes major American and world developments.

Pop is a major successful commercial enterprise that targets a wide youthful common denominator, but it alone cannot present the picture of America which American public diplomacy is intended to present—that of a country with rich, multifaceted culture, revolutionary ideals, commercial vitality, history-making values of human rights and social justice, and standards of transparent government. Nor is pop music what young Arab needs today to form a more enlightened view of their societies

and the world, or to build a more participatory society firmly rooted in human values. Pop does not attract potential future leaders or opinion makers. It does not build credibility.

News of the non-Arab world almost always plays second fiddle on Sawa's airtime. The station has literally scores of news reporters in Arab capitals, especially in Iraq, but only one part-time reporter in the United States who provides reportage from the State Department or at times from The White House (but never from Congress). Sure, Arab news is of utmost importance and a big draw, and must be accorded prominent play. However, significant events (economic, cultural, scientific as well as political) always take place in America and elsewhere in the world, and they must be covered.

The true nature of Radio Sawa's broadcast content and performance remains a mystery to the legislative and executive branches of government in Washington, because the station continues to resist any outside, independent review and probe of its programs. The station also refuses to accept the critical findings already reached by such investigative agencies as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the State Department Inspector General's office.

"The father of Radio Sawa," Mr. Norman Pattiz, years ago came to the conclusion that Arab hostility and dislike of America were caused by, in his words, "hate speak on radio and television. Incitement to violence. Disinformation, government censorship and journalistic self-censorship. And it was from within that kind of environment that the

Arab street was getting its impressions, not only of U.S. policy, but of our people, of our culture, of our society." And he was going to set things right with his grand new broadcasting adventure.

Five years after a steady diet of Sawa pablum, U.S. prestige and standing in the Arab World are at record low, and its image uglier than ever. Official U.S. poll results show that in Iraq, for example, 70 percent want the U.S. to withdraw from that country, and no less than 60 percent approve of killing Americans.

This is perhaps the best testimony to the abject failure of Mr. Pattiz's grand design.

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¹ All the analyses, assessments, evaluations and judgments included in this study of Radio Sawa's programs are based on extensive first-hand, personal listening to the American station's broadcasts. The author's conclusions were reached after continual off-air spot-monitoring of Sawa's Arabic airtime. Random sample listening covered most hours of day and night since the station's establishment:

² A music stinger in broadcast production is something like a punctuation mark in writing. It's a brief burst or bar of music that separates program items or parts of a program segment.