

BBC Arabic TV: A “Unique Experience”

Hosam El Sokkari talks to Arab Media and Society

By Lawrence Pintak

We all know the story: A decade ago, the BBC pulled the plug on its ill-fated Arabic TV joint venture with the Saudis when it turned out they didn't quite see eye-to-eye on news values. The out-of-work staff became the nucleus of Al Jazeera's original news team.

Now the Brits are back, actively fielding resumes for a new Arabic-language channel, this one *sans* pesky partners. *Arab Media & Society* co-editor Lawrence Pintak caught up with Hosam El Sokkari, the head of the BBC's Arabic Service and himself a veteran of both that first BBC joint venture and Al Jazeera, to discuss the BBC's re-entry into an increasingly crowded media market.

Pintak: BBC Arabic television, it is almost BBC coming full circle in the Middle East, isn't it?

El Sokkari: In a way yes. We realized back in 1994 that this is the medium of choice in the Middle East. And we wanted to be available in vision for our audiences there.

However that experience was not sustainable for certain commercial reasons. And since the closure of the first BBC Arabic television we have been trying to get back into the market. Previously we did not have the money. Now we have the money. And we're going ahead with it.

Pintak: Where did the money come from?

El Sökkari: Re-structuring. The BBC has been trying since the experiment in the 1990s to get back on television in the Middle East. But the BBC was not happy with the commercial model. The fact that this model did not last beyond two years made the BBC decide it had to be funded from public money. As the BBC could not get any extra funding overall, the decision was made to do some restructuring to re-organize BBC World Service resources. And Nigel Chapman decided that there are some parts of the world that do not need a BBC presence and that investing in the future of the organization means going into television is the way to go.

Pintak: This is a crowded landscape out here. Is there room?

El Sökkari: I am not sure it is crowded. I mean you have quite a number of TV channels that are video, music and entertainment channels. But the number of news and information channels is actually very limited. You can count up to 3 or 4. So in terms of numbers it is not a crowded market.

In terms of what we offer, we believe that it is unique, We also believe that there is a need. Our previous research indicates that at least 80 to 85 per cent of the sample of people that we surveyed from 7 or 8 different capitals would watch BBC TV often. And my own anecdotal evidence tells me that people are very interested in BBC Arabic TV. One of the first questions you always hear is when will there be an Arabic TV channel for the BBC? Or when will BBC Arabic television be back? So we do believe that there is a need.

We also believe that the market may not be as crowded as some people may suggest it is. There is a perception that the kind of audience we are addressing is the audience that is already watching some of the satellite news channels. We are different I think and we will be coming to the Middle East with something unique to offer. It is not just a TV station we are talking about but a multimedia platform in Arabic that will serve our audiences whatever they do wherever they are.

Pintak: Aren't some of the Arab satellite channels going in that direction already? What is unique, what is radically different?

El Sokkari: What is radically different is the fact that we are doing this as an integrated multimedia platform. We have a radio station, we have an Internet operation, and we will have a TV operation. And we have compelling interactive content. I don't think there is anyone in the Middle East that is doing that.

Pintak: Let's talk content. How will that be different?

El Sökkari: The content is different because our angle is different. We do not take sides in debates. It is true that some of the Arab satellite TV channels introduced views that are not and were not common in the market, but it is the way these views are introduced that makes us different. I think that the plurality of views and perspectives that we offer is far more than anything that you can see in the Middle East.

And the way we handle these perspectives is very different. Our presenters do not join guests to attack other guests. We do not have a political message. Lots of channels do not hide the fact that they are there to advance what they believe is their audiences causes. And that in itself is a position. We do not take positions in debates. We are there to cover the issues. We are there to make it possible for people to contribute. We want to make people comfortable that their views have been understood the way they want them to be understood. We train our journalists to help people to express their views properly so even if they miss-represent themselves, they are comfortable that their views came across as they wanted them to be represented. So this is, I think, a radical difference. It is not something that you find very often in TV or media across the Middle East.

Pintak: You do not have a political message yet the BBC is using Foreign Office funds to set up the new Arabic channel. Why does the British public want to spend its money on a channel in the Arab world?

El Sokkari: Back in the year 2000 Kofi Annan said that the BBC is Britain's gift to the world in the twentieth century. He didn't say that because the BBC is disseminating the British government's views across the world but because the BBC has evolved as a unique media experience that uses public money to inform, educate and entertain. It is not a strange concept because there is a benefit that comes back to the British public from having this operation operating from London. There have been numerous occasions where the British government has not been very comfortable with what we do in the BBC and recent history clearly demonstrates that the BBC does not follow any political line or at least *attempts* not to do so. So we are there to serve the public and the funding is available to serve the public.

Pintak: Does it fall within the public diplomacy umbrella?

El Sokkari: The public diplomacy umbrella extends to it. But it depends what you mean by public diplomacy. We believe that furthering understanding will help people make their own minds about different issues. We do not believe that we have to get people to respond to different issues in a certain way. So if this is considered public diplomacy—fine, but we are not there to make a particular political message. We are there to let people have the chance to understand the different angles of any particular issue. Our message is professional; it is not political.

Pintak: Not Britain's Al Hurra?

El Sökkari: We have experience of covering the Middle East for the people of the Middle East back to 1938. If people want to get a sense of what the TV station will be like they should listen to the BBC Arabic service radio, or they should go to www.BBCArabic.com. Our editorial values are going to be retained and enhanced. There are bound to be lots of questions as to how we are going to format and to pack our information. But there is no question as to whether we are going to adhere to BBC values that our audience in the Middle East has known since 1938.

Pintak: Talk about the practicalities who what when where?

El Sökkari: 2007 certainly, but probably not the first two quarters. We will be operating from London. Initially we were looking into different buildings from which we could operate. Bush House and TV Centre did not seem appropriate. So we are likely to start broadcasting from a broadcasting house where the whole service is located. We will expand on our presence in the region in Cairo, maybe Baghdad, maybe Beirut. And we are considering our news-gathering strategy and are planning for the next few years.

Pintak: How many staff?

El Sökkari: Not less than one hundred.

Pintak: Total staff?

El Sakkari: Well, the whole service will probably be between 250 and 300. But that is radio, online, interactive, and television.

Pintak: Are your television reporters going to be reporting for the web and the radio as well?

El Sakkari: We are still studying the issue and are trying to come up with solutions. It is practically impossible for one person to cover all platforms. He might be able to do different things for different platforms at different times. But we are still discussing how practical and how possible it will be to get people to contribute to different platforms.

Pintak: Given the number of journalists moving from channel to channel, you could say that the pool of qualified Arab journalists who know how to do television is relatively small. For example, Ibrahim Helal is heading back to the BBC from Al Jazeera; a variety of BBC veterans have turned up at the new Al Jazeera International...

El Sakkari: And there is Salah Negm [another veteran of the original BBC venture who set up the newsroom at Al Jazeera and is the new director of news for BBC Arabic] coming from MBC [where he was general manager, and formerly head of news at Al Arabiya] to the BBC. It is a healthy sort of dynamic equilibrium in a way. But I am not too sure that we really need a vast number of people who understand how to do television. When we launched in 1994 there were a very limited number of journalists who had experience in television and those who had, had been working in state television

which was incomparable to what we wanted to do. So if you provide people with the right training within the right environment I think they will be able to expand their experience and work with it. We will need a core group of people who have had experience with satellite television but it does not have to be a large number of people.

Pintak: My point is that if you have journalists moving between these various channels how much difference at the end of the day is there between the channels?

El Sokkari: Well, BBC Arabic television was the mother of all channels, because from that channel came all the experienced staff who built Al Jazeera, Al Arabeya and all the other channels afterwards. Certainly, having people who have been trained and who have had experience in different channels would be an asset to our station. But the BBC has a lot to offer journalists in terms of expertise across the whole organization. And that is what we are going to build on if these experienced staff come back from other stations.

Pintak: Is it a matter of them being able to report without redlines?

El Sokkari: It is not just that. I think the core issue of professional journalism in the BBC is already established in the guidelines. This is something which attracts journalists to us, but it is not the only thing. It is also the system within which we work, the kind of respect that we have for everybody who works with us, the consultative approach that we have when it comes to exploring editorial issues. Of course, we take decisions here and there but we also give people a chance to contribute their views and to offer alternative

treatments for stories within the boundaries of our editorial guidelines. I think this is an attractive place to work—people feel safe when they work in the BBC. They know that they are not going to wake up in the morning and find that they have been dismissed. You know there is a certain degree of stability that relates to the kind of system that we work within. And I think this is an attraction for lots of people. I have been flooded with applications even before we started recruiting and even before the announcement itself. So I am convinced that lots of people want to join the BBC, lots of people want to join BBC Arabic television, and I am sure it is going to be a unique experience.

Pintak: Hosam El Sökkari, thank you very much.