



Voice of America versus Radio Sawa in the Middle East: A Personal Perspective

By Laurie Kassman

May, 2007. Comparing Voice Of America (VOA) to Radio Sawa is like comparing apples to oranges. The US government funds both but that is about where the similarity stops. Radio Sawa is an Arabic-language pop music radio that broadcasts exclusively to the Middle East. The Voice of America has a more global reach with many language services sharing the funding. But since VOA English has mostly been silenced in the region and VOA Arabic has lost its voice altogether after Radio Sawa was created in 2002, it is important to show how American public diplomacy broadcasting to the region has changed. This article highlights the key differences in news approach and content between the channels, and argues that by scrapping VOA in the Middle East, the US has both undercut its own public diplomacy interests and the interests of listeners in the region itself.

Radio Sawa's "hostile takeover"

In 2002, the VOA Director and two members of the Broadcasting Board of Governors—the board that oversees VOA, RFE-RL (Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty) and several ‘surrogate’ radios—told the VOA staff of its decision to eliminate VOA’s Arabic service and create Radio Sawa. They said a new approach was needed to respond to the changing demographics of the Middle East, where more than half the population was under the age of 35. At the time, BBG member Norm Pattiz said the key to winning the hearts and minds of Arab youth was in winning their ears. One solution, he said, was to play the top hits from East and West to grab their attention and listening loyalty.

Before VOA Arabic was shut down, it broadcast a variety of cultural and educational programs with less emphasis on music. There was general agreement within the service that it was time to revamp programming to appeal to a more youthful listening audience. Reporters and broadcasters had started brainstorming about new programs. I remember the Arabic Service reporter in Jerusalem, for example, quickly scouted out potential recording studios in Ramallah for live call-in shows. Others looked at ways to liven the music. Much to the chagrin of VOA Arabic staffers, the brainstorming translated into thinking outside VOA and creating a separate radio station with a new cast of characters. One staffer described it as a “hostile takeover.”

A key argument for creating Radio Sawa was the dwindling audience for VOA Arabic broadcasts, which were distributed mostly via short wave. Data at the time showed that listeners were turning to medium wave and FM frequencies. VOA management had drawn up a \$15-million plan in 2001 to expand transmission capabilities

and lease FM frequencies to boost the VOA presence. But the Arabic service was eliminated before the plan became reality. Instead, the BBG negotiated for FM and medium wave frequencies to expand Radio Sawa's reach in the region.

Radio Sawa is a non-VOA brand. For listeners in the Middle East, Radio Sawa was not clearly identified as a US government radio. Listeners were surprised that VOA Arabic was off the air. They couldn't hear VOA English either because Radio Sawa had usurped the medium wave and FM frequencies VOA English was using to bolster its shortwave feeds to the region.

During my trips into Baghdad in 2003, Iraqi listeners complained to me they could no longer hear the informative VOA Arabic programs they had grown up with or the Special English programs that one teacher told me she had used for her college students. Others said they had switched to BBC and Radio Monte Carlo for their English and Arabic broadcasts, thus depriving the US of an effective public diplomacy tool.

The timing of the changeover from VOA Arabic to Radio Sawa could not have been worse for those of us in the field. It was April 2002 and I was temporarily assigned to the Jerusalem bureau to help cover the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian turmoil. Tensions were building. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had sent his troops into the West bank. PLO leader Yasser Arafat was a prisoner in his West Bank compound. The Palestinian

broadcast facilities were knocked off the air and Palestinians were desperately seeking the latest news.

The phone calls began flooding into the VOA office. “Where’s VOA? We can’t get any news, just music. What’s going on?” At a time when we normally would have provided reliable, balanced news and analysis about events taking place on their doorsteps, we were feeding them the best of Britney Spears and Eminem 24 hours a day.

Sawa labeled a propaganda tool, not a trusted news source

Commentators and critics of Radio Sawa in the Middle East complained that the short newscasts, sandwiched between pop songs, were focused too heavily on pronouncements out of Washington. They labeled the station a US propaganda tool. That kind of label is hard to shake and only adds to the mistrust of US words and actions.

After Radio Sawa began broadcasting, I encountered some political leaders and analysts in the Middle East who were reluctant to be interviewed by me and other VOA correspondents. They assumed that Radio Sawa had replaced VOA. They told us they did not want to be tarnish their reputation by associating with a network they perceived to be trivial and biased.

From the start, Radio Sawa has boasted success based on how many were listening rather than who. The music format was novel and attractive but FM stations in

Jordan, Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East quickly imitated it. So what difference can Radio Sawa make if few are paying attention to it?

Radio Sawa's management says the network has increased news and information programming to about seven hours a day, including live coverage of key speeches, news conferences and Congressional hearings from Washington. News Director Daniel Nassif says the formula is one third news and two-thirds music, with magazine or chat shows usually scheduled for evening hours. News reports average 35 seconds in length, features about three minutes. Radio Sawa says its discussion shows on the Iraqi stream include "The Free Zone", which is billed as its "signature program on freedom and democracy issues" in the Middle East. Some Radio Sawa staffers who had worked for VOA Arabic before acknowledge the station is improving its content but they tell me it is hard to shake its image as a shallow rock 'n roll station.

Radio Sawa considers itself a serious station, pointing to its dedicated staff in the region and around the world as evidence. It says it has more than 70 employees on its staff in the Springfield, VA headquarters and its Middle East Program Center in Dubai, UAE. In addition, the network says it contracts with 90 stringers based in 43 major Middle Eastern, European and international cities. US coverage is supported by stringers in Washington DC and Detroit, Michigan.

But the station has not fulfilled its own goals. When Radio Sawa was created five years ago, the goal was to broadcast in a pan-Arab stream with six dialect streams

targeting different areas of the Middle East with more localized news (Egypt/Levant, the Gulf, Iraq Morocco, Jordan/Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Sudan/Yemen). Radio Sawa management says only the Iraqi dialect stream is operational for now to supplement the pan-Arab broadcast, which is mostly music.

VOA: A very different broadcast outfit

In comparison, VOA is considered a much more authoritative news channel, which performs a valuable public diplomacy role in regions where news is often censored, as in the Arab World. VOA Managing Editor Alex Belida says Middle East stories account for about one third of the daily world news output of VOA's newsroom. English reports by newsroom writers and correspondents in the field are translated by VOA's other 44 language services for use in their own programs. When the Arabic Service existed it also drew on the valuable resources of the central newsroom.

There is no doubt the VOA approach to news is more thorough than Sawa. VOA news reports run from one to one and a half minutes in length compared to 35 seconds. Background writers offer a longer, in-depth look at breaking stories to put them into historical, political or social context that enrich the listeners' understanding of the news event. Special half-hour discussion shows like Press Conference USA and Encounter often deal with Middle East issues in a concerted and robust way.

As mandated by Congress, VOA English also offers a mix of news and features that open a window on the American lifestyle and American values—something almost completely absent on Sawa. The reports and features are translated into the other language services for their use as well. VOA English also pioneered an international call-in show more than a decade ago that often highlights Middle East issues. It was quickly imitated by the BBC, reflecting how much VOA standards of broadcasting were valued around the world.

VOA has always taken the Middle East very seriously. Its dedicated staff in the region includes a correspondent in Cairo who covers a territory that stretches from Morocco to Iran. Another correspondent based in Jerusalem focuses on Israel and the Palestinians. A small number of correspondents shuttle in and out of Baghdad and a handful of stringers contribute to the daily report file. Correspondents from Washington, Europe or Asia are often called on to help cover crises in the region,

VOA: Absent from the Middle East when it is most needed

But despite VOA's tried and tested news coverage, VOA's English-language coverage of the Middle East is no longer heard in the heart of the Middle East. After VOA Arabic was shut down, I found it frustrating to report from Washington on Middle East issues that affected the region knowing my Middle East audience could no longer hear my reports in Arabic or English.

In fact, other than a few hours of English broadcast in Baghdad, Mosul and Kuwait, VOA is only audible in non-Arabic languages on the periphery. VOA Turkish runs for about six hours a week, Kurdish for four hours a day, Urdu for 12 hours a day, Dari and Pashto alternate on the half hour on a 12-hour program stream for a total of six hours a day, Pashto also runs another 24/7 stream and Persian broadcasts 24/7 jointly with RFE/RL.

The irony of all this cannot be underestimated. When the Middle East is a focal point of US policy, a key tool of public diplomacy is absent. By example, the Voice of America shows respect for First Amendment freedoms, for a free exchange of ideas and a diversity of opinions that US public diplomacy tries to promote.

When the lingua franca of business and politics is overwhelmingly English and more state radios—from BBC, France 24, Chinese and Russian government radios to Al Jazeera—are increasing their English broadcasts to the Middle East, why is VOA silent?

The Voice of America was established in 1942 with the mission to present the news, good or bad, to people who could not receive accurate, unbiased information. That mission has not changed. VOA reporters and editors adhere to the highest standards of the news industry to fairly present news about the world and, most important, about the US. That includes culture and politics. VOA has never shied away from presenting a balanced and critical view of both. It has been touted as a respected source of news and

information around the world, targeting not only a general population but also policy makers and leaders of influence.

To borrow a cliché often used to describe public service broadcasting in the United States, VOA has cared more about quality than quantity—reaching the ‘grass tops’ as well as the ‘grass roots’ of society. Some critics say that makes VOA sound too stale and stodgy because for VOA, talk trumps music. But VOA English has sought a better balance in recent times in order to appeal to younger listeners while not forsaking a target audience of present and future leaders.

I agree with critics that VOA needs to adapt more quickly to its listeners’ changing habits, but it does not need to do this at the expense of the quality of its programs. Striking this balance is made all the harder by yearly budget cuts. VOA’s English service has been reduced from 24 hours to 14 hours a day, while the 2008 budget request to Congress would reduce English broadcasts by another 14 hours, effectively taking worldwide English off the air. That would leave only VOA English to Africa programs, which currently totals 41 hours a week.

TV, the Internet, and the future of VOA

As new media emerge and grow around the world, VOA is being asked to diversify its operations, but on falling budgets. For example VOA’s TV operation, recently added to the mix, lacks appropriate resources to compete well with regional

outfits. The BBG has shifted its focus and funds to expand the TV component of the government's broadcast operations but VOA staffers complain it is not enough to compete in the regional markets against better funded, better equipped networks. Twenty-five VOA language services have established a TV component. But the BBG went outside VOA again for Arabic, creating another separate entity outside VOA's control—the public diplomacy disaster that is Alhurra—which further undermined VOA's reputation in the Middle East.

In the age of new media, VOA risks becoming irrelevant if those who run it do not provide the resources and support necessary to adapt to the changing demographics and wishes of the populations of the Middle East. I believe there can be a productive blend of music and substance for VOA broadcasts that would appeal to those who wield influence within their societies. But even that is not enough.

The Internet has become a key source of information for all ages. The Internet is the future of news delivery, especially in countries where critical or dissenting views are still censored. Internet usage in the Middle East continues to expand both in English and Arabic. VOA and Radio Sawa have plunged into the market. They cannot afford to be left out.

VOA's website's audio links to correspondents' reports is now the only avenue for VOA English to effectively penetrate the Middle East. VOA's mix of news, features and analysis feeds a free-access website that can be read in English or in any of VOA's

43 languages, a new and important way of bringing in an audience. Director of VOA Internet Michael Messinger says there are currently about one million visitors a week to VOA's 24-hour website. Several million more in China and Iran access the site through proxy servers. By comparison, Radio Sawa's Arabic website carries less complete news and information pages in addition to audio links to its radio broadcasts.

US public diplomacy needs a wide array of tools to be effective, including the Internet, radio and TV. VOA has managed for 65 years to offer a cost-effective tool for showing the multitude of voices, cultures and histories that are America. VOA also shows sensitivity to the cultures and histories of others, which could help bridge the gap of mistrust and misunderstandings. This is critical in the Muslim world today when opinion polls show US credibility at an all-time low. A poll conducted last year by Zogby International in six pro-US countries of the Middle East shows that only 12 percent of those responding to the survey have a favorable view of the United States.

Creating Radio Sawa outside VOA raised many an eyebrow about the true intention of the project. After its launch five years ago, commentators in the Arab world accused the US of trying to 'dumb down' to listeners in the Middle East or subvert its more conservative societies.

There was little disagreement that VOA Arabic needed an overhaul to adapt to the changing face of the Middle East. For me, the shame is that the BBG and its backers did not choose to work within VOA, whose charter mandates by law VOA's objective

approach to news coverage. They could have applied a creative touch to update the overall product. Many at VOA have called for resurrecting VOA Arabic and resuming serious programs to the region. I would argue for resurrecting English too. If we can find FM and medium wave frequencies in the Middle East to broadcast music, why not provide more quality programs too?

The US administration has thrown a lot of money and people at trying to reverse the downward slide of US credibility in the Middle East. In the race to do that, I fear it settled for a quick fix and disregarded time-tested tools that already exist and just need more support to do the job better.

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