

America's Voice as it could have been

By Myrna Whitworth

May, 2007. Since the first broadcasts of Radio Sawa in 2002 and Alhurra Television in 2004, much has been written to either justify or question their existence and their role in the mission of US international broadcasting. If one believes the literature of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees all US international broadcasting, the Middle East networks, with their bland programming and popular Arabic and Western music, have been an unqualified success and the major US public diplomacy accomplishment since 9/11. But Middle East pollsters and regional experts both in the United States and the Middle East question this assessment.

In fact, surveys from the region suggest that regard for the United States is at an all time low; even Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Ladin are held in higher regard than President George Bush. A survey conducted by Mohammed el-Nawawy and published in the August 2006 edition of *Global Media and Communication* found that Arab students' perceptions of United States foreign policy declined after listening to broadcasts from Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television. And it is not only foreign policy, other recent polls, including the 2006 Zogby International survey on Arabic attitudes toward the United States, suggest that there is even concern American popular culture is threatening to overwhelm traditional values and ways of life.

Obviously something is not going right. Granted, we cannot lay all the blame on Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television. The main culprits are the Bush Administration's ill conceived war in Iraq and its official outreach which many have called "arrogant, aggressive and bullying." However, the inability of Sawa and Alhurra to speak with critical populations in the Middle East and their emphasis on the most trivial of American pop culture have marginalized the United States and prevented a reasoned and substantive conversation between the United States and the Arab world. The United States is capable of doing better.

While I cannot speak about the creation of Alhurra, as I had left international broadcasting before it was conceived, I was present for the planning of Radio Sawa first as Voice of America Program Director and then as VOA Acting Director. One element of the Sawa story that has not been written is that which deals with a concerted effort within the Voice of America to counter the FM pop music formula that the Broadcasting Board of Governors was proposing with a VOA branded, full service Arabic network. This is that story.

Two models for Middle East broadcasting

There were two models for broadcasting to the Middle East that were being assembled in early 2001: the Broadcasting Board of Governors' (BBG) formula of music and 'news light' and a VOA 24 hour broadcast stream designed to engage all segments of the population with substantive news and information relevant to their lives within an entertaining, well presented, contemporary

format. The BBG chose to ignore the VOA construct, in fact, I doubt if any member ever read the proposal.

The genesis for revamped and invigorated Arabic broadcasting was not the attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The planning for a 24/7 Arabic network was nearly complete by then. It had begun over a year earlier with the collapse of the Camp David discussions among Ehud Barak, Bill Clinton and Yassir Arafat and the onset of the second Palestinian Intifada. These events were the impetus for the United States to begin an evaluation of its broadcasting to the Middle East. If the people of the Middle East gave up on peace, the argument went, the region would become a cauldron of violence and terrorism. The United States must play a role in shoring up the “peace process” and strengthening the forces of moderation and peaceful coexistence. It must also have a stronger voice in the growing media options in the region. In the words of one expert, the new electronic media had “reinvigorated a sense of common destiny in the Arab World and created a more engaged public opinion.”

At the time, the Voice of America with an Arabic language staff of 35, broadcast seven hours a day on antiquated shortwave and minimal range medium wave transmitters into the Middle East. Broadcasting in this manner to a part of the world in which FM radio and satellite television had become the dominant media resulted in very low audience numbers—by some accounts in the 2% range. VOA Arabic programming also had some responsibility for the low audience. While no one could question the substance, accuracy and quality of the news and information product, formats were dated and stodgy, many of the writers and on-air personalities—while qualified professional journalists—were aging, and there was a general malaise that was not conducive to dynamic, interesting programming.

Voice of America senior management, along with transmission engineers, began to take a hard look at revamping programming and delivery to the Middle East. We wanted to develop an easily accessible broadcast stream that would appeal to a broad audience: current leaders and those being groomed for tomorrow, as well as women, students and the discontented of the Arab World. At the same time, the Board of Governors, under the guidance of Governor Norman Pattiz was formulating its own concept. As founder and chairman of the nation's largest radio syndicator, Westwood One, Pattiz had become a very rich man creating mass programming for the American youth market that consisted of lots of music and very little news. If his formula had worked so well in the United States, he concluded, it was exactly what was needed to appeal to the younger generation in the Middle East. Although he and other members of the Board traveled to the region to evaluate the broadcasting climate, his main consultants were the same people who had helped him with Westwood One. They understood American media, listening habits and pop music, but had little grounding in international relations, diverse cultures or the history and concerns of the Middle East.

The Pattiz formula did away with the VOA brand, the VOA Central News Product and the comprehensive analysis that was the hallmark of the VOA Arabic Service for 55 years. The BBG, which receives all of its funding from the American taxpayer, also did not want to be constrained by federal regulations regarding personnel and contracting that were part of the VOA structure. And as many believe, the Board did not want to be held to the standards and requirements of the congressionally mandated Voice of America Charter. The Charter, signed into law in 1976, is the foundation of VOA's credibility. The document requires VOA to provide accurate, objective and comprehensive news; a broad and balanced picture of American institutions, thought and values;

and a thorough discussion of US policies on a broad range of issues. It provides a road map for US international broadcasting that is as relevant in today's war on terrorism as it was in the Cold War.

The VOA plan, on the other hand, embraced the tenets of the Charter while invigorating programming and improving transmission strategies. We proposed reaching our target audiences by combining music, news and Americana in a vibrant 24 hour broadcast stream hosted by well informed and personable on-air personalities.

News would remain a priority. As the first principle of the congressionally mandated VOA Charter states, "VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news." That is the law. Carefully sourced, objective and accurate journalism was at the core of the VOA Arabic Middle East network proposal. In addition to news on the hour and headlines at the half hour, six prime time hours daily would be devoted to news and news related discussion and call-in programs. Written prior to 9/11, the proposal envisioned daily locally originated programs from Amman, Cairo and Jerusalem focusing on conflict resolution, peace and dialogue among the people of the Middle East. If adopted today, this type of program could offer an opportunity for dialogue among the various factions within Iraq. In addition, we set aside one hour during the mid-day for women's programming combining child rearing, health and education with cooking and life style segments.

Disc jockeys knowledgeable of national and international issues, as well as pop music and entertainment, would host the music and interstitial program segments. Interstitial elements were designed to offer brief insights into American life, culture, education and thought. Programming

material would be prepared and adapted by professional journalists based in Washington and New York, in major Arab-American communities such as Detroit, Houston and Los Angeles and throughout the Middle East.

Our program stream was not developed in a vacuum. VOA professionals in the Central Newsroom and language services supplied input, as did transmission engineers and marketing officers. Middle East experts at the State Department were consulted. We also turned to nine specialists knowledgeable of the Middle East and mass media issues including three former United States ambassadors to the region and Washington based Middle East academicians and journalists including Shibley Telhami, Hisham Milhem, Mamoun Fandy and Khalil Jahshan. They agreed that there was a demand in the Arab world for American news and information including social and cultural trends, lifestyle issues and political developments. They also told us what we already knew—that we must find ways to more effectively reach the younger successor audience in the Middle East. Contradicting the BBG model of one formula-one language, the group of experts was convinced that bilingual programming would appeal to the youth of the Middle East.

From these discussions came a number of program initiatives that were incorporated into VOA's plan. These included an Americana program hosted by an Arab or Arab-American equivalent of Alistair Cook that would focus on the diversity, peculiarities and vibrancy of American life and culture. It would seek to look at the United States through Arab eyes and to offer perspectives more complex and subtle than those held by many people in the Middle East. Regular commentaries on current issues by a rotating series of Arab and Arab-American

specialists would be offered to reinforce the perception that VOA programming is balanced, thus strengthening its credibility.

The \$15.5 million Voice of America proposal called for \$6.5 million in recurring costs and \$9 million for one time program transmission upgrades and equipment. These included adding medium wave transmissions from Cyprus, Kuwait and/or Abu Dhabi, and obtaining FM frequencies in key Arab population centers. The Voice of America plan also recognized the importance of the new media to reach the younger successor generation, and provided for a 24 hour Internet news service in Arabic with text and streaming audio/video. While it did not envision a 24 hour satellite television service such as the BBG creation, Alhurra Television, the VOA plan did create a daily three-hour block of Arabic television programs for placement that included a call-in interactive program, and magazine and discussion shows of potential interest to the region. One can argue that the \$15.5 million proposal offered both the Middle East audience and the United States greater bang for the buck than the \$35million that it cost to get Radio Sawa up and running and its continuing operational costs of \$22 million.

VOA senior management submitted the first draft of its Middle East Network to the Broadcasting Board of Governors on January 4, 2001 and continued to expand and refine the proposal until early summer when we were told that our services and ideas were not welcome. The Board was moving in a different direction.

Timing is everything. Would the BBG and Norman Pattiz, the driving force behind Radio Sawa, have been able to convince the White House and Congress to do away with VOA Arabic

and create a new service if it had not been for three airplanes that crashed into New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001? We will never know. But in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Washington officialdom was desperate for a public diplomacy outreach to the Middle East. Enter the Broadcasting Board of Governors and its initiative for a Middle East Radio Network. Although Pattiz, a Democrat and friend of Bill Clinton, and BBG Chairman Kenneth Tomlinson, a conservative Republican named to the Board by George W Bush, often found themselves at cross purposes, they did maintain a united front as they approached Congress and the Executive Branch with their sophisticated Power Point presentation and their assurances that the network could be operational in a matter of months. I doubt if anyone looked too closely at the specifics or questioned assumptions about staffing and programming. And no one on Capitol Hill or at the White House was ever aware of another plan that addressed not just the young people of the region, but all segments of the population; a plan that offered pop music but emphasized American news and public affairs programming.

The BBG got its funding for Radio Sawa, but there was a tradeoff. VOA's full service Arabic service went silent in March 2002 after 55 years of informing audiences throughout the Middle East. Its professional staff of qualified and trained journalists were replaced by contract employees speedily recruited from abroad; some with questionable credentials and loyalties. Appeals to save some vestiges of the Arabic Service's informational programming or to maintain a small news Internet service fell on deaf ears. The VOA brand in Arabic no longer exists. Even the region's large English speaking population finds it difficult to tune in for information from the United States. Most of the frequencies that once carried VOA English news and information have

been turned over to Radio Sawa's youth oriented programming. And if the BBG has its way, even these few English hours will be eliminated in 2008.

The Bush Administration's budget request for 2008 calls for a \$20 million increase in funding for Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television. To offset the increase, a number of VOA services have been targeted for reduction or elimination, including Uzbek, Cantonese, Georgian, Hindi and Russian. And the VOA English flagship service, VOA News Now, at one time on the air 24/7, will become a thing of the past. English will be reserved for a few hours a day of targeted programming to Africa. Al Jazeera and the Chinese, French, Iranians and Russians understand the importance of English, the language understood or spoken by some 1.6 billion people worldwide. At the very time that the United States is planning to all but eliminate programming in its mother tongue, they have initiated 24-hour television and Internet services in English.

Today international broadcasting has a vital role to play in communicating and establishing dialogue with the people of the world. No where is that more important than the Middle East. Unfortunately, while we may be reaching some young people of the "Arab Street" with easily replicated music play-lists, the United States is doing little to engage those policy makers and professional and university elites that once tuned in to comprehensive news and information, in English and Arabic, on the Voice of America. As several recent studies have suggested, Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television give lip service to high journalistic standards, but have not followed them. As for the music, here are some lyrics I recently heard on Radio Sawa: "He's nothing but a pimp," and "I'm going to let you have your way with me."

It is doubtful that these are the messages the United States wishes to communicate to the Arab world. However, there is some hope. Norman Pattiz is no longer a member of the

Broadcasting Board of Governors and Chairman Kenneth Tomlinson has announced he will not seek re-nomination. Their replacements may be willing to take a more critical view of their creation and make much needed mid-course corrections. As for the Middle East Broadcasting Network (Radio Sawa and Alhurra Television), new management promises to improve the quality and quantity of substantive programming. On Capitol Hill, the new Democratic Congress plans to scrutinize the Bush Administration's 2008 Budget request, and hopefully will take a fresh look at international broadcasting, especially to the Middle East. The Voice of America plan submitted in January 2001 could serve as a valuable starting point.

Myrna Whitworth is a 28 year veteran of the Voice of America who served as acting director of the agency on three separate occasions, including in the fall of 2001. At the time of her retirement in 2002, she was VOA Program Director. Her early career was spent in VOA News where she served as Executive Producer of World Report—VOA's flagship news program, English programs news editor, and special projects coordinator. Whitworth now teaches courses in Media and Politics at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland and at American University's OLLI Institute in Washington, DC.