

**British Middle East representative, Jon Wilks:
Fluent Arabic spokesmen can “promote a freer media
in the Arab World”**

Interview by George Weyman

MAY, 2007. *Recently posted at the British embassy in Dubai, Jon Wilks is no newcomer to the Middle East. Having served across the region over a number of years, the fluent Arabic speaker has been brought in to explain British government policy to the Arab World. Speaking to Arab Media & Society Managing Editor George Weyman, Wilks talks about his role, revealing his mixed views on Arab-channel interviews and how he avoids discussing conspiracy theories.*

Weyman: Tell me a little bit about your role—why have you been posted to the Gulf?

Wilks: Sure, about 6 years ago we decided there was a benefit for the British government to have spokesmen in Arabic. And we’ve had Arabic spokesmen based in London now for about 6 years. But in recent years with the building of the media city in Dubai, a lot of the big headquarters and the journalists have actually moved to Dubai—the center of

gravity now is there. And London which had been one of the major centers for Arabic media is less so now. So we decided we needed Arabic spokesmen both in the region based in Dubai and in London, so that's what we've got now.

Weyman: So you can respond to events quickly and get to the story when it happens.

Wilks: That's right, quick response. It's also the fact that one can do more because one of the new developments in the Arab media are the big chat shows and debate shows on channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, and we need to have somebody who's actually there who can get in the studios and can take part. For instance, *Aktar min Rai* on Al Jazeera is based in London so we can do that with our London based spokesman, a lot of the other shows we need people in Dubai or Doha or other places in the region.

Weyman: There's an impression in the West that political discussion in Arab media is quite limited. From your experience would say that is true?

Wilks: Well my view is that these debate shows are one step towards free debate in the Arab World. There are still limits on what these channels can do. But it's definitely a new development and it's definitely pushed the red lines compared with five or ten years ago. And it has opened up a space I think for a lot of groups within the Arab World and you know these channels are very keen to have foreign representatives who can speak

Arabic. So one of the reasons for having more Arabic spokesmen is there's more room and more demand from Arab media these days for foreigners who speak Arabic.

Weyman: Do anchors on Arabic news channels ask of you the same things that you would expect from a BBC or a CNN?

Wilks: I think there are two things I've noticed from my experience so far. In some ways, a lot of questioning from Arab broadcasters is actually quite polite compared to a lot of the questioning you get in the West, and particularly some of the British broadcasters who've developed quite an aggressive style. Nevertheless you've also got a certain feeling that a spokesman is going to have to sort of attempt to justify policies which in the region are seen as controversial, so for instance Israel-Palestine, Iraq and sometimes even policies that we're implementing at home—counter-terrorism operations and that sort of thing. So it is different to being interviewed on the British media but in some ways it's more polite, and in other ways it's more complex.

Weyman: So which questions do you find hardest to answer, those about British foreign policy or those on Britain and Islam?

Wilks: I find the questioning about either our foreign policy or counter-terrorism policy at home actually pretty interesting to answer and I enjoy the debate. I think the most difficult thing to answer is occasionally you get a question that is based on a conspiracy theory that is so extreme and absurd it's very difficult to know how to answer it. And of

course conspiracy theories are everywhere and we all know a lot of them, but some are quite beyond belief, and it's very difficult I think to get a debate going when people start from two so completely different ways of looking at things. But that aside, what I normally do is try and move it on to territory where it brings the debate out, and there I find it's more easy to say something useful.

Weyman: Perhaps you can give an example of a conspiracy theory—and how have you dealt with that?

Wilks: Well occasionally you do get the conspiracy theories that the reason I'm based in Dubai is there's about to be a military attack on Iran and therefore they want somebody close to the theatre of operations. Now when that sort of thing comes at you as a question, and particularly when you say that's ridiculous—it's more about technical and media reasons, ie. the building of the Media city—and then the question comes back again on the same lines, "Oh did you want someone in the theatre of operations?" it starts to lose its usefulness and its interest. So that's the sort of thing, trying to get off those sorts of hooks and get back into what the debate's really all about which is, you know, Arab media coming back to the region from somewhere like London and offering opportunities for new sorts of debates with participation from foreigners as well as Arabs. That's the interesting subject matter.

Weyman: Are there some channels that pose more of the kind of questions you are describing than others?

Wilks: It varies. Al Jazeera can sometimes always want to pick up the crazy angle, but it sometimes happens on national channels as well.

Weyman: You, Jon, must be drawn to the culture and society of the Middle East having studied the language to a very high level, do you find yourself in interviews where you actually disagree with British policy?

Wilks: I'm not paid to be a pundit and express a personal view, I'm there to represent the British government and to explain British government policy. But as my colleagues told me when I took on the job it would be quite boring and quite limiting if all you could do was talk about the official line to reflect the Prime minister's views or the foreign secretary's views. And therefore, I have been asked, and I'm certainly delighted, to talk more broadly about issues and talk more broadly about my personal experiences, because I've served in Baghdad after the fall of the regime and I've served in a number of other different Arab countries in the region, so I have a personal perspective. So I can hope I can bring something of my personal knowledge and experience to the debate.

Weyman: Of course in more recent times, we've witnessed something of a gap opening up between on the one hand, the British government's foreign policy towards the Middle East, and on the other the position of the Foreign Office and ambassadors in the region. Tony Blair has talked about an arch of extremism in the Middle East, something you don't hear from British Arabists in the Foreign Office. So with the move to establish an

Arabic BBC channel funded by the Foreign Office as a public diplomacy tool, will we be seeing views which diverge from British foreign policy broadcast directly to the region?

Wilks: Well the message from the BBC is that the style of BBC television in Arabic is going to be part of the tradition of BBC Arabic radio. And I think anyone who listens to that knows that it's not a mouthpiece for the British government. You'll get a lot of critical debate about British foreign policy, about the lives of Muslims in Britain, about counter-terrorism operations. The BBC Arabic service is given editorial freedom, and I'm sure that's going to continue with BBC Arabic television. That's going to be one of the most exciting things this year.

Just going back to your previous question about the British government and whether there's a Foreign Office view and a view of other ministries or whatever. Our system in Britain is different from that of other countries and particularly that of America where we have a system of collective responsibility in cabinet, so differences of views among ministers will be made at cabinet level and agreement will be made, and then the prime minister and the cabinet will go out and argue for the policy that's been agreed on. So the way the British system works is actually to synthesize views across government and let ministers discuss things in cabinet committees and at cabinet and then come to an agreement. It's not quite the same in the American system where in the inter-agency process you've got all the arguments of the different ministries which are very often carried out in public and in the media.

Weyman: Let's talk more broadly about public diplomacy. There's a perception in the West that many problems in the Middle East stem from a lack of information. You mentioned for example conspiracy theories. But many argue that really it's the policy not the presentation of policy that upsets people.

Wilks: Well I think the important point here is transparency. In Britain policy on Iraq has been very controversial and there has been continuous debate in the media, in parliament in all sorts of public fora, about Iraq, about the decision to go to war, about the post-war reconstruction effort. And what we want to do, because we believe it has benefited Britain and we believe it benefits a democracy to have an open debate and to have transparency, is to do that in Arabic just as we do it in English at home. So it's about the policy, it's about the substance. It is about explaining the British position. It's also about allowing others to challenge that. And one of the things we want to do as part of the effort to promote a freer media in the Arab World, and to promote democracy in the Arab World is through Arabic spokesmen actually participating in the debate in the Arab World just as we do back at home.

Weyman: Politicians across the world still seem to think that setting up a news channel is the best way to influence public opinion. France 24, Russia TV, German Deutsche Welle, the US Alhurra TV and soon the BBC are all broadcasting television in Arabic to the Middle East. But who's watching it? Surely appearing on the region's own channels is a more effective way of being heard?

Wilks: Well I think there's an understanding, a widespread understanding among many countries that the question of how the Arab World and how Europe and how America live together, how we maintain our relationships in future, is in part about building mutual understanding. And the development of the media in recent years, in recent decades gives us a new opportunity. And what's interesting—you just reeled off a list of countries who are developing Arabic media channels, or Arabic media participation, that's one side of it, but another side of it is actually in the Arab World people are starting to say, and we've been saying this to many of our media contacts in the Arab World, the Arab World too has got to try and promote itself in our countries. And I actually think the Al Jazeera English channel is one important tool to achieve that.

Weyman: As the articles in our current issue of *Arab Media & Society* about US public diplomacy broadcasting show, it's obvious there are very real debates in the US and the West in general about how best to reach people in the Arab World—the Internet versus radio and TV, hard news versus news lite and entertainment, English language versus Arabic language. Where do you stand on these debates?

Wilks: Well it seems to me, and I think your website points this out very clearly, that the pan-Arabic satellite TV channels and the influence they've had on Arabic TV in a national setting has been immense. And that has to be the main priority in terms of reaching a wider audience. But also clearly the Internet and Web logs will have, although still a relatively small role to play, will have a unique role to play and we've all got to be aware of the new developments.

Weyman: Jon Wilks, regional spokesman for the British government in the Middle East,
thank you very much.