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Al-Hurrah Television and Lessons for U.S. Public Diplomacy

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The question before us today is not only one of Al-Hurrah's performance and role in improving the image of the United States in the Arab world. Inevitably, our discussion reveals the urgent necessity of a larger debate regarding where U.S. broadcasting efforts in the Middle East are heading.

The events of September 11 woke us up to the reality of growing anti-Americanism. The War on Terrorism and the Bush Administration's efforts to win "hearts and minds" include spreading our ideas of freedom and democracy to people deprived of them. Our public diplomacy should promote U.S. interests and security through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics, as well as broadening dialogue between American institutions and their counterparts abroad.

The work of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and Al-Hurrah television has been an important step in that direction. It is essential that we discuss their activities, as well as the lessons learned, in order to progress and be as efficient as possible.

This paper looks at the need for reform of U.S. international broadcasting in reference to Al-Hurrah and the BBG, and makes suggestions for broader organizational changes, as well as the need for coherence and clarity in the United States' foreign broadcasting mission, programming, and content.

Al-Hurrah was an important initiative in responding to previous shortcomings of broadcasting toward the Middle East. Because it is operated by a non-profit cor-

Talking Points

- Our public diplomacy should promote U.S. interests and security through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics, as well as broadening dialogue between American institutions and their counterparts abroad.
- Rethinking the mission involves going beyond Al-Hurrah and critically reconsidering the confusing organizational structure of U.S. public diplomacy.
- Eventually, all broadcast operations should be consolidated under one roof with services tailored by channel and content to priority countries and regions.
- We also need to distance ourselves from the impression that public diplomacy should deliver goodwill instantly among foreign publics without first establishing the necessary foundation of mutual trust and understanding.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/iraq/hl909.cfm

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poration, the idea was to avoid the heavy paperwork and long processes characterizing international broadcasting bureaucracy. The 24/7 satellite TV channel was meant to engage in a war of ideas and to combat distorted information with greater flexibility, intensity, and competitiveness. Yet despite positive intentions and deeds, Al-Hurrah shares certain problematic aspects with other U.S. foreign broadcasting efforts, which we urgently need to deal with.

Defining the Mission

Ever since the end of the Cold War, U.S. public diplomacy has declined, and there has been no true effort to redefine it. Al-Hurrah and other new international broadcasters have developed under different legal frameworks and they work within a fragmented organizational structure. The problem is not merely a lack of cohesion between the different entities, but also the absence of a general, well-defined strategy regarding what our international broadcasting tries to achieve. Because there is little clarity and agreement on goals, the perception of what the broadcasters' role should be can differ between the broadcasting staff and the government that funds them.

On one hand, journalists prefer to see their mission as providing accurate and objective news. At the same time as they are asked by the International Broadcasting Act to follow professional journalistic standards, their mission is also more broadly to discuss U.S. policy and improve America's image abroad.

These two functions do not necessarily have to contradict each other—that is, if the public diplomacy mission and victory in the war of ideas are defined as bringing necessary information and objective coverage of world events to people who would otherwise have no access to it.

Accordingly, if the international broadcasters are to be seen primarily as news agencies, they should be given all possible means to succeed in a highly competitive media environment—especially in the Arab world where Al-Hurrah competes with more than 100 other satellite TV channels. In that case, a change in the Smith–Mundt Act would be a wise decision to help build domestic support for the international broadcasters constrained by it. Simul-

taneously, broadcasting to a domestic audience could give more incentives for the public to understand and support the broadcasters' mission. Furthermore, it could lead to an increase in program quality by appealing to experts or other possible guests who would otherwise not see the significance in appearing in front of a foreign audience where they are often unknown.

Still, we should keep in mind that such a narrow definition of “winning hearts and minds” risks reducing U.S. international broadcasting to the status of any other news agency that needs, to a certain degree, to appeal to its audience and seek “scoops” in order to survive. Another alternative would be to think about how to communicate, or seek a dialogue and a base of understanding, with the foreign audiences we are trying to reach.

Lack of Organization and Oversight

Rethinking the mission involves going beyond Al-Hurrah and critically reconsidering the confusing organizational structure of U.S. public diplomacy. This confusion results from changes made after the merger of the United States Information Agency (USIA) with the State Department. USIA's area offices were consolidated into State's geographic bureaus and lost their independent budgets and reporting channels. The Under Secretariat of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs was created as an advisory position with no significant budget and no authority over public diplomacy personnel.

The Broadcasting Board of Governors was strengthened by the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act. The new BBG structure presents opportunities for conflict of interest. Sitting Board members serve part-time and may continue as executives in their outside businesses. Although that brings welcome expertise to the Board, there is little to keep members from directly hiring business associates to work in subordinate agencies.

The above-mentioned lack of a clear overall strategy is also reflected in a lack of coordination and coherence between different agencies under the BBG that target the same foreign audience. This can lead to duplicative efforts and a waste of money. One example is the Voice of America Persian serv-

ice and Radio Farda, which have no coordination of goal, message, or strategy in regard to audience. Also, these services suffer from a lack of external oversight. In addition to having no clear directives from the BBG, the lack of continuous mechanisms of evaluation and feedback have been detrimental to international broadcasting. A good option would be frequent use of external contracted evaluators.

Another issue that many of the international broadcasters face is the difficulties of professional recruitment, especially where language credentials many times come before journalistic experience.

What Should Be Done

We cannot engage in a complete reorganization of international broadcasting, as this would cause needless anxiety and waste. Furthermore, the improvements already achieved would be lost. But much can still be done. We could undertake:

- **An organizational global approach**, by restoring public diplomacy's integral reporting channels and budgets to the office of the Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs; and
- **A strategic approach** to international broadcasting by recognizing that public diplomacy is a long-term effort.

Congress should give foreign broadcasting a new, more flexible personnel system so it can expand and contract more easily, saving money that could be better spent on new technology.

Eventually, all broadcast operations should be consolidated under one roof with services tailored by channel and content to priority countries and regions.

We are also witnessing a change in the conduct of international broadcasting, brought to our attention more strongly with Radio Sawa and, to some extent, Al-Hurrah. The emphasis is being put on reaching a broad young audience, instead of targeting public opinion leaders and intellectuals. Similar efforts have been undertaken by other BBG broadcasters such as Radio Farda, which has carried out the same mixture of Western and domestic entertainment and news. Once again, what needs to be considered here is a clarification of long-term strat-

egy. If the bigger aim is to enlighten an audience, with no historical experience of democracy about democracy's values and functioning, the entertainment aspect would, to a lesser degree, serve this purpose. Nonetheless, for certain audiences, such as Iran (where entertainment is forbidden), this would give the population access to an asset available in a free society.

In the spirit of initiating a dialogue with the foreign audience, an alternative, which would require already mentioned changes in the Smith-Mundt Act, would be to broadcast certain programs to the American audience. This sign of cultural exchange would be a message to the foreign audience that the dialogue is also about us trying to understand them.

It is essential, while thinking of decisions of content and programming, to remember that each market is different and requires a certain strategy. For instance, there is a difference between a more pro-American Iranian population than the Arab street that is more negative toward the U.S. The concept of Al-Hurrah plays an important role. Al-Hurrah was meant to target a very diverse Arab world, where each country has a different relationship (both historical and current) with the United States. If Al-Hurrah is only to serve as a news agency, the same objective news content could be sent to all countries involved. But by having programs to inspire critical thinking, it must adapt to regional differences in language and culture.

A Broader View of Public Diplomacy

Today, we have mainly focused on broadcasting efforts, which seek to increase a foreign audience's understanding of the United States and the values of freedom on which the United States is founded.

Still, international broadcasting should not be the only channel used to influence foreign publics. I would like to briefly mention the importance of other practical measures that aim to support pro-democratic forces. These would further increase the process of inter-cultural dialogue, not only in the Arab world, but also in Iran, where direct action is highly dangerous. This could involve an increase in academic exchange programs, U.S.-supported libraries, funding of education and art

projects through non-governmental agencies, and the support and encouragement of contact between students in United States and the target population. These activities in the Middle East are of big strategic importance if we intend to reach out to foreign populations.

More generally, we need to distance ourselves from the impression that public diplomacy should come to the rescue and deliver goodwill instantly among foreign publics without first establishing the necessary foundation of mutual trust and understanding. Instead, reflex should become hab-

it. Public diplomacy is effective only when it builds on long-term relationships that identify common interests between people and capitalizes on them.

—*Helle C. Dale is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. These remarks were submitted to the House International Relations Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations for its hearing, “Broadcasting Board of Governors and Al-Hurrah Television” on November 10, 2005. The author wishes to thank Shora Zamani-Fekri for her assistance in preparing this testimony.*