

# Hip, Hip, Al Hurra!

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Articles & Testimony

**A**merican public diplomacy in the Middle East did not have a good week. An Arabic-speaking State Department official named Alberto Fernandez made news on October 21 when he spoke too candidly about U.S. missteps in Iraq on Al Jazeera, the Arabic satellite television channel based in Qatar. Not only was Fernandez obliged to eat his words, but the coverage of the episode in the U.S. media was incomplete and misleading. It's an all too familiar story to anyone engaged—as I am—in the business of attempting to communicate with Middle Eastern audiences via Arabic-language satellite TV.

What most media reports of the incident left out was that Al Jazeera had set Fernandez up. Fernandez went on the air immediately after a spokesman for Saddam Hussein's outlawed Baath party appeared under the pseudonym Abu Moham med. Al Jazeera provided Saddam's flack airtime to lay down a series of conditions that U.S. commanders would need to meet before Saddam's followers would consider negotiating over the withdrawal of U.S. troops—little matters like the reconstitution of Saddam's army, the scrapping of every law adopted since Saddam was removed from power, and the recognition of pro-Saddam insurgents as “the sole representatives of the Iraqi people.”

After the Baathist was done, Fernandez came on, and the Al Jazeera host lobbed a series of “Have you stopped beating your wife?” questions at him, including whether America was ready to begin talks with the Baath party. To his credit, Fernandez dismissed the entire conversation as “farcical” and “very removed from reality.” Later in the show, when describing the intense political debate over Iraq in our midterm elections, he went on to utter his too-honest-by-half words about the problems of U.S. policy.

But media reports also failed to explain how Fernandez, one of Foggy Bottom's finest public affairs officers, came to be on Al Jazeera in the first place. His appearance was the result of a decision made by Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes earlier this year to reverse U.S. policy and encourage U.S. officials to appear on the Zarqawi-friendly, Hezbollah-cozy network famous for referring to suicide bombings as “so-called terrorism” and “martyrdom-seeking operations.”

Fernandez's experience shows why this decision was unwise. U.S. outreach to Arabs is not advanced by having a U.S. diplomat engage in a he-said/she-said with Saddam's flack. Indeed, it's hard to imagine anything more apt to erode the image in Arab minds of Saddam brought low, captured cowering in a spider hole, than a U.S. diplomat forced to respond to the blatherings of a Baathist on an Al Jazeera talk show.

This error of U.S. policy is all the more frustrating in that there exists an Arabic-language satellite TV station that is eager to showcase U.S. officials without distortion—yet over the past year its invitations to senior officials of the White House, the National Security Council, and the State Department have been all but ignored.

That station is Al Hurra, the U.S. government-funded station established in 2003 to battle for the hearts and minds of Arabs bombarded by the anti-Americanism of stations like Al Jazeera. I have personal experience of the frustrations because I am about to celebrate a milestone: my one-year anniversary as the only non-Arab to host a talk show on Arabic satellite television. My weekly show is called Dakhil Washington (Inside Washington), and its purpose is to

demystify politics and policymaking in our nation's capital for Arab viewers.

Some skepticism about Al Hurra is, of course, understandable. In a Washington Post op-ed in April 2003 entitled "Wrong Answer to Al Jazeera," I myself opposed its establishment, arguing that the Middle East did not need yet another state-funded TV station. But after Congress voted overwhelmingly to support the idea, I decided it was important that the effort be pursued as effectively as possible. I believed—and still believe—that the battle of ideas really is a war, with life-and-death consequences.

When Al Hurra first went on the air in early 2004, I was living in Morocco, a front line state in the post-9/11 culture wars. From that vantage point, I could see that Al Hurra should not try to compete with Al Jazeera, which has a lock on the sensationalist, conspiratorial, rabidly anti-American, deeply anti-Semitic share of the Arab viewing market (regrettably, a pretty big share).

Instead, I concluded that Al Hurra should be the home for viewers starved for a free-thinking, progressive, intelligent alternative. It should be television for Arabs who want the unvarnished truth about what is going on in their own countries. And most of all, Al Hurra should be the preferred option for Arabs who want to understand what makes America tick—its politics, government, and society. Those curious, open-minded, eager-to-know Arabs are America's natural allies in the ideological contest against Islamic extremism. Done right, Al Hurra could connect with them—individually, on a daily basis—in a way not possible for any other public diplomacy initiative.

After a rocky start, the station has vastly improved its program content. Although not a disinterested observer, I say this as one of the few Americans who regularly watch Al Hurra, which is not available inside the United States. These days, the network is bolder than it was two years ago, much less risk-averse. Every week, for example, it airs a show called Equality, which stars a courageous Saudi woman who travels to Dubai to talk about the aspirations and frustrations of Arab women. For the Israeli elections last March, Al Hurra provided U.S.-style immersion coverage, bringing the mechanics of Israeli democracy to the TV sets of Arab viewers. The network even holds unprecedented town hall meetings in Arab cities during which usually taboo topics are the regular fare.

The A.C. Nielsen statistics show that more than 20 million Arabs watch Al Hurra each week. And the audience should be expanding: Just three months ago, Al Hurra extended its broadcast reach to the millions of Arabic-speakers in Europe. But perhaps the best measure of its progress is that it has gotten the attention of Arab regimes. The Syrian government kicked Al Hurra out of the country after the first of three scheduled town hall meetings, and a number of brave Arab liberals have been arrested after giving provocative interviews to the station. Critics whose views about Al Hurra were formed by the network's problematic early months on the air have a responsibility to give it a second look.

To be sure, Al Hurra has a long way to go. Two areas where it should be leading the pack are local and investigative reporting inside the Middle East and programming that explains America to Arab viewers.

Precisely because Al Hurra is not beholden to any Arab government, it is uniquely positioned to speak truth to power. Solidly reported local stories that expose waste, fraud, and corruption can both empower popular opposition to our adversaries and strengthen the institutions of accountability among our friends. Some of those friendly Arab governments throw towering obstacles in the way of Al Hurra journalists and technicians. Their hostility toward a U.S. satellite station that broadcasts over their heads into the cafes and living rooms of their people should be no surprise.

As for covering America, Al Hurra has a comparative advantage over its competition that it has not yet exploited. For all the poll data about how much Arabs hate America, my own experience is that they actually can't get enough of it. If Al Hurra performs no other service, it should at least be the satellite channel to which Arabs turn when they want to know what the U.S. government and the American people are thinking.

But this turns out to be more difficult than it sounds. The professional community of U.S. Middle East scholars is no help; its members universally dismiss Al Hurra as irrelevant. Most of these people hold remarkably strong opinions about a network few have ever watched. But since most academic Middle East experts believe anything connected to the U.S. government is toxic, their dismissal of Al Hurra is fore ordained.

Among key constituencies inside Washington, the situation is little better. Traditional government broadcasters, like the Voice of America, dislike Al Hurra because the upstart took assets and funding from existing operations. The old USIA crowd dislikes Al Hurra because its own hard-earned expertise—reaching out to captive nations under the thumb of Communist dictatorships—isn't directly applicable to a station seeking to appeal to viewers in countries whose friendly dictators we don't want to overthrow, but do want to prod toward democracy.

Most damaging of all, many in the State Department strongly disapprove of Al Hurra. Some believe the station unnecessarily complicates relations with Arab capitals. Others are irked because Al Hurra's sizable chunk of funding is controlled by the semi-autonomous Broadcasting Board of Governors, not by Foggy Bottom. Especially dismaying to me, as the host of a show trying to boost Arab understanding of Washington, is the stunning indifference to the success of Al Hurra shown by those people in the Bush administration who should be among its strongest supporters.

From my first week on the air, I have tried to showcase senior officials, so as to build up Al Hurra's brand as the must-watch station to learn what Washington is thinking. Despite many promises, only two senior officials—Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and White House spokesman Tony Snow—have appeared on my show. More important, only a paltry few have ever appeared on any Al Hurra show. Most exasperating is the fact that some senior officials seem to show greater deference to Al Jazeera than they do to taxpayer-funded television that declines to humiliate U.S. spokesmen or roll out the red carpet for disgraced Baathists.

For me personally, this is an irritant, not a show-stopper. There are enough fascinating people and provocative issues in our capital to keep Dakhil Washington on the air for a long time even without appearances by high-level government officials. But for the country itself, facing as it does the long-term challenge of confronting ignorance and distortion of America in the Arab world, it seems, to say the least, an opportunity missed.

Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is the author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands \(templateC04.php?CID=255\)](#). ❖

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