

Wrong Answer to al-Jazeera

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

To combat what is widely viewed as the slanted news coverage of Arab satellite stations, the White House and Congress are joining forces to spend tens -- perhaps hundreds -- of millions of dollars to launch an official Arabic-language U.S. government competitor. Unfortunately, it has a chance of turning out to be one of this country's most ill-conceived and wasteful experiments ever in public diplomacy.

At first blush the argument in support of what is called the "Middle East Television Network" -- METN -- is compelling. Most Arabs watch television as their principal source of news and find satellite stations more credible and interesting than their local, state-controlled networks. Most satellite stations, including the widely known al-Jazeera, present the news through an anti-American lens; none projects a dispassionate, analytical approach to news, let alone a pro-American tilt. The United States has been surrendering the field to its enemies, it is argued.

Advocates then cite the "success story" of recent U.S. government radio initiatives in the Middle East. Topping the list is the new Radio Sawa, a 24-7 operation that has four regional streams, all built around an innovative mix of Western and Arabic popular music. Preliminary listener numbers show that Sawa appears to have attracted a significant following. The patrons of satellite television -- the Broadcasting Board of Governors, a semi-independent body that oversees all U.S. government international broadcasting -- promise a similar success story on a much larger scale.

So far the idea has elicited cheers from the Bush administration as well as Capitol Hill. The result was a \$30 million request for METN in President Bush's 2004 budget and more in the wartime supplemental. Not to be outdone, the House and the Senate, in their versions of pending legislation, propose even more.

The only problem is that no one seems to have asked three critical questions: What precisely is the market niche for this station? What will its programmatic content be? And is this the most effective and efficient way to spend a new, large pot of public diplomacy money?

METN will fail for the same reason that Radio Sawa appears to have succeeded. Whereas the Middle East radio market is tightly controlled by local regimes, with very few transnational options available (such as the BBC or Radio Monte Carlo), the regional television market is overflowing with choice. Basic satellite service in a country such as Morocco, for example, without any paid or pirated supplement, provides access to five satellites with dozens of Arabic-language stations. At any moment of the day, one can watch news shows, documentaries, sitcoms, soap

operas, MTV imitators or dubbed Hollywood movies. Precisely which niche is METN supposed to fill?

As for content, the problem is that no conceivable programming for METN news shows would meet the dual test of popularity abroad and political correctness at home. Al-Jazeera and other Arabic satellite news channels won popularity because of their lurid sensationalism and no-holds-barred debates. Viewers tune in to see graphic details of the bloody side of Israeli retaliation to Palestinian terrorism and talk shows that feature the most outlandish radicals, such as spokesmen for the Taliban, Hezbollah or Saddam Hussein, duking it out with establishment mandarins.

Surely METN cannot try to be more sensationalist than al-Jazeera. Few in Congress are going to like subsidizing TV time for Iranian mullahs or the proud parents of Palestinian suicide bombers. The alternative would be PBS-style highbrow, high-quality news shows. That sounds great, but the reality is that such shows are likely to gain even fewer viewers in the saturated Middle East satellite market than PBS does in the U.S. market.

The upscale, well-educated Arab PBS market is hardly worth a nine-digit investment when the supposed target is angry, unemployed twentysomethings. Indeed, if the goal is to ensure satellite access for Middle Easterners to professional news that gives America a fair hearing, it would be much cheaper to offer tax incentives to U.S. broadcasters to perform the public service of dubbing and then duplicating their news in Arabic. The fact that CNN, CNBC and Fox are nongovernmental enterprises ensures far greater credibility than what is possible for METN. This more credible, less expensive plan would free millions of dollars for underfunded public diplomacy projects of proven value.

Before taxpayers are asked to buy into METN, due diligence is in order. So far, it hasn't happened. ❖

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