

A testimony by Professor Shibley Telhami  
Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland  
and Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Saban Center at Brookings Institution

**Hearing on the Broadcasting Board of Governors: Finding the Right  
Media for the Message in the Middle East**

United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
Chairman, Senator Richard G. Lugar

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Mr. Chairman,

Before addressing the role that Al-Hurra television station and other American media can play in influencing the hearts and minds in the Arab world, it is important to put the task in perspective.

**First**, the prevalent resentment of American foreign policy in the region and around the world is certainly influenced by the media coverage, but ultimately is not shaped by it. Europeans, Africans, Latin Americans, Asians do not watch Al-Jazeera or other Arab satellites, and yet we know from surveys that resentment of American foreign policy is pervasive in these places as well. Moreover, in the Middle East, even those many who have no access to satellite television express deep resentment of the United States. In fact, we know that the rapid decline in confidence in the United States is not a function of the media in the Middle East as such. In a public opinion survey conducted by the State Department in the spring of 2000, for example, over 60% of Saudis expressed confidence in the United States. The level of confidence began rapidly declining after the collapse of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in the fall of 2000 and continued to decline in the spring. This decline accelerated after the tragedy of 9/11 and the war on terrorism, reaching the single digits in the past year. In short, much of the resentment toward the United States is the consequence of events and policies, not the media coverage as such.

**Second**, to the extent that there is a profound change in the Arab media that has taken place over the decade, it is this: the media is far more market-driven than ever before. In the past, governments in the region nearly monopolized the media, especially television, and they catered largely to their own domestic constituencies. They generally had captive audiences. Today most Arabs who have access to satellite television have dozens of choices, mostly from outside their own boundaries. They watch what they want to and turn off what they don't. Successful media outlets such as Al-Jazeera prevail in getting a large market share by understanding their consumer. Because the Arabic language is common in all Arab states, language defines the potential size of the market. As such, the target consumer is no longer "the Qatari" or "the Kuwaiti" but "the Arab." In that regard, a station succeeds in getting the largest share of the market by understanding what is most in common among Arabs and catering to it. In that regard, the media more often than not reflects public opinion more than it shapes it. That is not to say that it does not often reinforce opinions or incite passions, but in the end people watch it because it resonates with their pre-existing passions and opinions.

Two examples are especially helpful in this regard. Al-Jazeera television, which is now being accused of inciting anti-Americanism and anti-Israeli sentiment in the Arab world, was accused by many Arabs in the late 1990s of being "pro-Israeli" or even "a Zionist agent." The reason for this attitude of many Arabs was that Al-Jazeera was especially bold in putting on the air Israeli voices on a regular basis, including coverage

from the Israeli parliament (the Knesset). When they discussed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, they not only hosted Palestinian representatives but also Israeli representatives (which incidentally they still often do). Still, despite that accusation by some Arabs, Al-Jazeera gained a huge share of the market for a simple reason: at the time, most Arabs assumed that peace between Israel and the Arabs was on its way, and most knew little about Israel and were interested in learning. Al-Jazeera brought Israel to homes in Riyadh and Rabat that had not seen Israel before.

As soon as the negotiations collapsed and Israeli-Palestinian violence escalated, the public had less hope for an agreement and was more focused on the bloodshed. Al-Jazeera was there to cover it live. It kept its market share. Last year, just before the Iraq war, when Al-Jazeera came under pressure to lessen coverage of Palestinian-Israeli bloodshed, something else happened. In Jordan, where Al-Jazeera has been number one for news on the Arab-Israeli conflict, its share of the market dropped to number two. Taking its place was a station that focused on the violence even more: Al-Manar Television, run by the Lebanese Hezbollah. In short, while we must understand that each station, including Al-Jazeera, certainly has its own agenda, the degree to which it succeeds in gaining the widest viewership is largely a function of market demand.

**Third**, today's satellite Arab stations, especially Al-Jazeera, give more direct voice to American officials than ever in the Arab world. Most of these stations give live coverage with verbatim translations of major news conferences by top American officials and military commanders related to Middle Eastern matters. In general, these

views are presented without editing, although there are discussions that follow with people who are often critical of American officials but also those who are not. While such coverage gives the US more direct airing of its voice than ever, this is not always a good thing. This is in part because American official views often reinforce the fears and biases of the Arab viewers rather than alleviating them. In addition, American officials, even when they are addressing a Middle Eastern audience, speak with the knowledge that their words are going to be ultimately judged by the American media, Congress, and American public opinion, which therefore incline them to formulate their message in a manner that again reinforces the fears and biases in the region.

**Fourth**, in times of pain, tragedy, and war, people everywhere, and certainly Arabs, listen and watch with their hearts more than with their minds. We have witnessed this first-hand in the weeks after the 9/11 horror and certainly during the war with Iraq. To some extent we continue to experience this, although to a lesser extent. In the Middle East, the last few years have been times of continued pain, war, and tragedy, including in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in Iraq, in major terrorist attacks in several Arab countries. The public is not neutral, especially in these times. The media, even the professionally-run media, is also not fully neutral: they reflect the passions of the public. If they don't, few would watch. Certainly some reporters and media outlets exploit this deliberately to gain viewership, which is unfortunate but not surprising. But even those who are not deliberately exploitative cannot escape sometimes speaking with and catering to the heart. This is in fact one of the biggest obstacles facing a station like Al-

Hurra, which seeks to have a detached, objective analysis of the news during times of pain. Its aim is to be precisely dispassionate while facing a passionate audience. A recent example of this is when Israel assassinated Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Al-Hurra ran a short story as the news broke, then went back to its normal programming, which focused on an episode in American history. Other Arab satellites stayed with the story live and brought coverage with different perspectives, including live shots, which was bound to gain a far larger share of the market.

**Fifth**, I have already suggested at the beginning of this statement that the media's role in shaping anti-Americanism is modest, and that the most important factors are policies and events on the ground, not strategies pursued by the media as such. In a recent report by an advisory committee on public diplomacy, which was mandated by Congress, and on which I had the honor of serving, we recognized that the role of public diplomacy itself is relatively small in shaping attitudes, compared with policies, even though this role is still important.

The media plays a relatively modest role even within public diplomacy as such. The report emphasized, especially educational and other civil society exchanges between the U.S. and Arab and Muslim countries, as the best method of reaching the hearts and minds in the long term. Still, the U.S. should have a voice in the region and cannot be absent from the media market, as this market is evolving and will continue to evolve as

a consequence of technological change and increasing competition. In that sense it is certainly useful to begin experimenting with television and radio programming that may ultimately have an effect . But two things must be kept in mind in this regard. First, expectations must be put in perspective here. Al-Hurra, no matter how professionally run (and I believe it is professionally run) will not succeed in any foreseeable future in either gaining a significant share of the news market in the region, nor be able to significantly affect public opinion on its own. It must be conceived for now as having an American voice that essentially will gain enough trust overtime to have a positive, even if small, impact. Second, one has to assess its desirability in terms of the bang for the dollar: In the end it comes down to resources. In absolute terms, the funds spent on Al-Hurra are not large if one considers that we're spending nearly three times as much as its entire annual budget in a single day in the Iraq war. But that same amount brings to mind the extraordinarily low amount of money and the low budget that the US government expends on its entire public diplomacy program in the Muslim world of 1.2 billion people. (The estimated budget is \$150 million annually, of which only \$25 million are specifically allocated to public diplomacy outreach programs.) Until that budget expands significantly, as I believe it should, the allocation to Al-Hurra will seem disproportionate.

Thank you Mr. Chairman