

6. Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV: Opening Channels of Mass Communication in the Middle East

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[The terrorists] know that a vibrant, successful democracy at the heart of the Middle East will discredit their radical ideology of hate. They know that men and women with hope, and purpose, and dignity do not strap bombs on their bodies and kill the innocent. The terrorists are fighting freedom with all their cunning and cruelty because freedom is their greatest fear.

—President George W. Bush

On September 11, 2001, the United States had no significant channels of mass communication with the people of the Middle East. Today, with the new broadcasting initiatives of Radio Sawa and Alhurra TV, we do. Three years ago, our only broadcast link, the Voice of America's Arabic-language radio service, was attracting a measured weekly audience of roughly two million adults in the region. Today, Sawa and Alhurra have a total unduplicated weekly audience of some 24 million Arab adults (and likely millions more in countries not yet surveyed), as measured by ACNielsen studies and other research in July and August 2004 in eight Middle Eastern countries.

Multiple waves of survey research in the Middle East in the last several years confirm sustained weekly audiences for Sawa and Alhurra, suggesting they are becoming part of Arabs' regular media mix. This is a remarkable finding given Arabs' dislike of the United States and U.S. policy, and it points to Sawa and Alhurra's staying power and prolonged impact. Moreover, the research shows that large percentages of these weekly audiences find the stations' news to be reliable.

It is true, but hardly surprising, that Arabs turn first to al Jazeera, al Arabiya, and other indigenous sources for news instead of U.S.-supported

channels. However, the issue for Sawa and Alhurra is not whether Arabs use them for news first but whether they use them for news at all. And they do. Arab audiences, like people everywhere, typically consult multiple sources for news and information.

By regularly reaching unprecedented numbers of Arabs with accurate and balanced reporting, current affairs programs, debates, roundtables, interviews with U.S. policymakers, and much more, Sawa and Alhurra are making a vital contribution to long-term U.S. foreign policy goals of promoting freedom and democracy in the region. For, without an informed citizenry, there is no chance for democracy.

The Broadcasting Board of Governors

Sawa and Alhurra are model initiatives of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the federal agency responsible for all non-military international broadcasting funded by the U.S. government.¹

The Board is bipartisan with four Republicans, four Democrats, and the Secretary of State as an *ex officio* member. Together they constitute a collective chief executive officer. Each member is appointed by the president and confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Each has one vote in agency decisions.

The Board's responsibilities encompass strategic planning, budgetary and legal affairs, intra-governmental relations, and oversight to ensure adherence to mandated standards and principles. Among key Board duties are serving as a firewall against interference in news content and reviewing annually all BBG language services to adapt broadcasting to global media and political developments, deleting and adding services as necessary.

These latter functions go to the heart of why Congress originally created the Board and later established all of U.S. international broadcasting as an independent federal agency. Only an independent board of directors made up of private citizens with experience in broadcasting and governmental affairs has the wherewithal to ward off interference with journalistic content and to spark change within the bureaucracy.

The BBG's team of broadcasters includes the long-established Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio

1. The BBG was established in 1994 by the U.S. International Broadcasting Act as an autonomous body, operating in conjunction with the now-defunct United States Information Agency (USIA). The 1998 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act abolished USIA and transferred most of its functions into the Department of State. The BBG became an independent federal agency. The name "Broadcasting Board of Governors," which previously had referred only to the nine-member board, became the name of the new agency. In this chapter, "BBG" will refer to the agency as a whole; "Board" will denote the nine-member board that provides leadership for the agency.

Free Asia (RFA), and Radio and TV Martí, as well as new broadcasters like Sawa and Alhurra (including Alhurra-Iraq), under the umbrella of the Middle East Television Network. These broadcasters have different legal frameworks—some are federal entities, others are grantee organizations—but all adhere to the same code of journalistic standards as set out in the U.S. International Broadcasting Act.

This same legislation, together with the 1998 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act, constitutes the basis for the BBG mission: “To promote and sustain freedom and democracy by broadcasting accurate and objective news and information about America and the world to audiences overseas.” This was, in essence, VOA’s mission in the face of Nazism during World War II and RFE/RL’s mission in the face of Soviet totalitarianism during the Cold War. And today, it is Sawa and Alhurra’s mission in the face of radical Islamic fundamentalism in the war on terror.

It is unrealistic to think we can accomplish this mission overnight. Receptivity to BBG broadcasts in the Middle East is strongly affected by negative Arab perceptions of U.S. policy in the region. In the face of this animosity, our role is to exemplify a free press in action. We let the facts speak for themselves. We are confident that our overseas audiences, once fully informed, will make decisions that over the long run will coincide with U.S. values and interests—with what President Bush has called a “forward strategy of freedom.”

Therein lies the BBG’s unique contribution to public diplomacy, the business of engaging, informing, and influencing overseas audiences about the United States and U.S. policies. Many public diplomacy programs seek influence through advocacy. Our influence, like that of any professional journalistic enterprise, resides in the quality of our news reporting, current affairs shows, and features programming. Information constitutes power and influence everywhere in the world. But in societies that suppress information, as do all countries in the Middle East to one degree or another, accurate and objective news and information are especially powerful and influential.

Sawa and Alhurra: New Models within U.S. International Broadcasting

Sawa and Alhurra are examples of a new global broadcasting strategy that holds mission imperatives and market forces as co-equal in the overall broadcasting (and public diplomacy) equation. The strategy recognizes that we must marry the broadcast mission to the particular circumstances of individual markets (countries or regions) in order to cultivate an audience for our objective journalism. Because each market is different, each requires its own tailored broadcasting strategy.

The new strategy is an important evolution of U.S. international broadcasting. Long-form broadcasts via shortwave radio that worked during the Cold War are often lost in today's more sophisticated global media markets. Captive audiences in closed societies have now become savvy consumers in media-rich environments. Largely favorable attitudes toward the United States and U.S. policies have given way to widespread anti-Americanism. To reach people today, U.S. international broadcasting must demonstrate unprecedented understanding of markets and audiences and find a way to make our mission-driven programming resonate. That is precisely what Sawa and Alhurra aim to do in the Middle East.

Questions persist, nonetheless, about the need to have created Sawa and Alhurra in the first place. Some assert that the VOA Arabic service was a quality news and information product for decision makers and opinion shapers ("elites") that simply needed better distribution to attract a wider audience. Others argue that launching our own 24/7 TV channel was unnecessary and a waste of money when we could more effectively reach our desired audiences with U.S.-produced programming distributed over popular Arab TV networks.

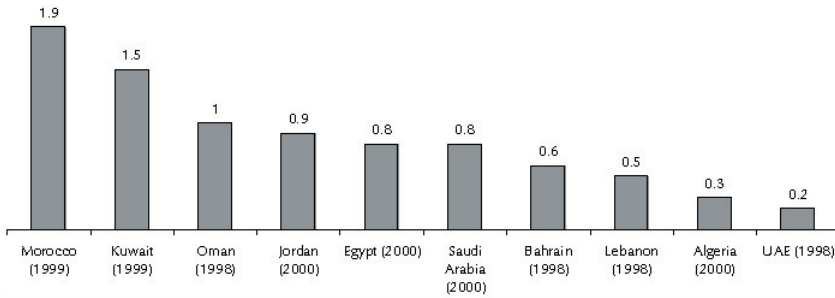
Moving Beyond VOA's One-Size-Fits-All Radio

Radio Sawa was created as a pilot program for U.S. international broadcasting, allowing the BBG to bring to bear modern, commercial broadcasting techniques in the field of public diplomacy. It is an answer to those who asked why America, arguably the world's media leader, could not present a more viable broadcast product in the Middle East.

Well before the events of 9/11, the Board had identified the Middle East as a priority for U.S. international broadcasting. For a host of reasons, VOA Arabic was unable to attract a significant audience. It was broadcasting a one-size-fits-all, seven-hour programming stream for the entire Middle East despite substantial regional differences in language and culture. It employed no audience targeting or modern radio formats. It relied largely on shortwave and AM transmission though FM had become the dominant means of radio distribution in the region. It featured long programming blocks, instead of the shorter, faster-paced programming preferred by listeners.

Surveys in the region from 1998-2000 showed that only a very small proportion of people in the Middle East were even aware VOA Arabic existed, despite its having been on the air since 1950. Weekly listening rates among the general population across the Middle East were in the low single digits (see figure 1). Even in the one place where VOA had local FM—Kuwait—less than 2 percent tuned in weekly for Arabic broadcasting.

FIGURE I. VOA Arabic weekly listenership (percent of general population age 15+)



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors data (multiple studies 1998-2000).

Hence, distribution was not the only problem.

Focus group research showed that audiences perceived VOA as biased, essentially a mouthpiece for the U.S. government. Listeners reported the service had a distant, detached feel and sound. Many said it lacked a clear, contemporary identity in an increasingly crowded media marketplace in the Middle East. An Egyptian lawyer who was an occasional listener to VOA Arabic put it this way: “The Arab listener does not feel . . . targeted when listening to this station, because it is an American station speaking in Arabic in the name of America.”²

In February 2001, I led a BBG fact-finding trip to Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, the West Bank, and Israel. We met with senior Arab government officials, radio and TV broadcasters, journalists, media executives, academics and others, as well as U.S. ambassadors and embassy personnel. They all roundly affirmed what the research had already indicated: BBG needed to overhaul its broadcast product if we were to be a player in the region.

This was brought home during the trip by a U.S. government official who candidly explained that local embassy staff faced a dilemma when proposing to senior State Department officials, including the secretary of state, which media to appear on in the region. Should they recommend our own official VOA, even though it had hardly any audience, or should they

2. Female participant in focus group in Egypt, November 2000.

suggest one of several very popular Arab networks? The decision, we were told, was not difficult: the Arab networks got the nod every time.

Although growing anti-Americanism in the Middle East cast doubt on whether governments in the region would cooperate with us, we were met with warm receptions throughout the trip, and we uncovered opportunities for local broadcasting distribution.

Following the trip, and after consulting with the Administration and Congress, the Board redirected \$3 million of BBG funding to the pilot project that would become Radio Sawa. In the aftermath of 9/11, this modest outlay was met with additional appropriations to expand and improve the new network.

Choosing the TV Network Model over TV Syndication

There is still debate within public diplomacy circles as to whether the U.S. government should pursue a syndication model rather than establish and control its own stations or networks. Proponents of syndication in the Middle East have argued for distributing U.S.-produced programming over Arab satellite channels.

Syndication can be an excellent means of distribution, but it works only when the programming content jibes with the format, philosophy, and commercial interests of the carrier. Otherwise, it is a misfit. In the Middle East, syndication of U.S.-produced news and current affairs would be highly problematic.

First, there is the issue of access. BBG would surely want no association with government-controlled Arab media that routinely censor the news and harangue the United States. At the same time, popular independent Arab networks like al Jazeera would be very hard pressed to sacrifice their own broadcast time. Actual syndication options would likely be with third-tier networks offering limited audience reach.

Secondly, there is the issue of content. Time-sensitive news is out of the question. Even news partnerships are problematic. In the late-1990s, VOA quickly ended a joint news venture with the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation when it could not ensure editorial control over programming content. Placing politically sensitive current affairs programming is equally dubious. The only likely viable option would be some form of non-news, features programming. It remains to be seen how this might work, but the challenge is not simply to place attractive programming, but also to serve a U.S. public diplomacy mission while meeting the programming interests of the host network.

In short, syndicating U.S.-produced programming on Arab media is worth a look, but it is fraught with challenges. Even when it is an option,

audience reach is episodic, waxing and waning with intermittent program placement. Also, syndicated shows are susceptible to being cancelled in times of crisis or tension, just when they are needed most. Certainly, syndication is no substitute for the U.S. government having its own TV channel, especially in the top-priority Middle East, where our national security interests require open channels of communication with Arab audiences.

Reaching Large Audiences of All Ages

Sawa and Alhurra seek to reach the largest possible audiences consistent with their mission. To do this, Sawa targets young adults, 15 to 30, while Alhurra aims to attract news-seekers of all ages. The two work in tandem to reach a cross-section of Arabs, young and old. It is important to note that such targeting does not mean Sawa does not attract older listeners or that Alhurra does not draw younger viewers. Actually, each achieves a good mix. The purpose of the targeting is to inform station positioning, branding, formatting, and programming. Each is key to broadcasting success, but none is possible to do well, or at all, absent clear audience targets.

To build large audiences for our mission-driven programming, we have to exploit the relative strengths of radio and TV as broadcast media. Modern radio is largely a medium of formats. In the U.S. context, these include news, talk, sports, and various types of music. By formatting a radio station in a specific way, we can appeal to a specific audience segment. At home, people often listen to the same radio station all day. In cars, they have preset buttons on their radios to quickly get to stations whose formats they prefer. Using an Arabic-Western popular music format is the best means of attracting large numbers of Arab youths, who then stay tuned for newscasts.

Television, in contrast, is largely a medium of programs. TV targets audience segments program by individual program. As a result, most people do not tune to a specific TV channel and leave it on all day. In the Middle East, where program guides are not readily available, “channel surfing” is especially common. Airing a wide range of appealing shows allows Alhurra to attract a much more diverse audience than would be the case if it provided 24/7 news programming. And again, with frequent newscasts and updates, people who otherwise would not watch Alhurra’s news do so.

Radio and TV are mass media that, by definition, are vehicles to reach mass audiences measured in millions. Modern broadcasting, as just discussed, leverages the strengths of these media to maximize audience reach. If we seek to reach only elites, then we should consider the Internet or non-traditional vehicles such as direct mail. Similarly, public diplomacy, at its best,

adds value by engaging in large-scale government-to-people communication that complements the outreach traditional diplomacy already undertakes to elites such as government officials, media owners and editors, and leading academics, among others. Too often, in my experience, when government broadcasters lay claim to an elite audience it is because they have failed to show a significant following among the general population.

In the Middle East, the elite versus mass audience discussion becomes almost moot, as 60-70 percent of the population is under age 30. Few of the region's young adults qualify as elites by any definition usually applied. Arabs aged 30 and under number 180-210 million people, many of them unemployed and disaffected. They enjoy few opportunities for social mobility and progress. They are ripe for exploitation by radical Islamic fundamentalist ideology and elements of Arab media that seek to incite them. Reaching them is key.

A further, important reason to reach mass audiences is that genuine democratic transformations are almost always mass movements. In Poland, Lech Walesa was the leader, but Solidarity was the movement. In Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel was the leader, but the Velvet Revolution had mass appeal. And so it went across central and eastern Europe as the Iron Curtain fell. To promote freedom and democracy during the Cold War, RFE/RL and VOA reached mass audiences. Today, U.S. international broadcasting needs to reach similarly large audiences to achieve the same effect.

Competing on an Uneven Playing Field

It is difficult to overstate the obstacles Sawa and Alhurra face as they seek to fulfill their mission and vision in the Middle East. There is hardly a broadcasting environment in the world today more difficult than that in the Middle East (see box 1). The range of challenges, encompassing both political and media factors, is daunting. They include fierce anti-Americanism, hostility toward U.S. government media presence in the region, rising media competition overall, government resistance, and inherent difficulties in reaching youths with news and information.

Recent opinion surveys in the Middle East point to rising Anti-Americanism. Hostility toward the United States complicates the work of Sawa and Alhurra in two important ways. First, there is a potential turn-off factor that might keep some people from tuning in at all. Second, when they do tune in, their anti-Americanism naturally makes them more skeptical, even cynical, about the news and information we broadcast.

The main drivers of the anti-Americanism are opposition to U.S. policy on Israeli-Palestinian affairs and U.S. involvement in Iraq. Reports on each fill the newscasts of Arab radio and TV and the front pages of

BOX 1. THE MIDDLE EASTERN MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

None of the sixteen Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa is a democracy. In this context, free expression by the media is limited and self-censorship is common. Government agencies control media directly or have the power to grant or deny licenses to TV and radio stations. However, with the emergence of satellite TV—and the Internet to a lesser extent—governments are losing their information monopoly. To compete with popular satellite channels such as al Jazeera and al Arabiya, many countries have established state-funded satellite channels, but few attract large audiences.

State-run TV and FM radio stations dominate the media market but have faced increasing competition over the last decade. Governments typically limit the number of private FM broadcasters and domestic TV channels available: Bahrain, Libya, Oman, Tunisia, and Yemen have no private FM broadcasters. Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the West Bank have between four and eight private FM stations. Only Lebanon and Iraq have ten or more private FM stations.

Lebanon is by far the most open domestic TV market, with seventeen private TV stations. Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the West Bank each have one private TV station. Most countries have only state-run TV stations. The real competition to state-run TV comes from satellite channels. Access to satellite TV is increasingly pervasive throughout the Middle East and parts of North Africa. As many as 90 percent of all households in the wealthier Gulf countries have access to satellite TV. In less affluent countries, such as Egypt, that figure drops to 25 percent. According to the latest estimates, there are about 73 million potential adult satellite TV viewers from Morocco to Oman.

In most countries—specifically, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE, and Yemen—viewers have access to between 15 and 180 satellite TV channels, depending on location and financial resources. Viewers who can receive both NileSat and ArabSat satellite networks can watch about 125 channels for free, and 262 if they pay for additional subscriber-only channels.

Rather than using TV listings, viewers in the Middle East and North Africa tend to constantly channel-surf, making competition among TV channels even more intense.

newspapers every day. Constant media content that portrays the United States as the enemy of the Arab people hardly helps promote other U.S. government activities like Sawa and Alhurra.

Much of the Arab print media has not wanted the Arab people to have a chance to make up their own minds about our new broadcasting initiatives, particularly Alhurra. Newspaper articles attacked Alhurra before

the channel even went on the air. Commentary from *al Khaleej* newspaper in the United Arab Emirates as typical: “This media offensive does not differ from the military, political and economic invasion as well as the terror (of the United States) . . . The only way to improve the American image is to change policy in the region and let the people choose their fate freely.”

Negative Arab press coverage may have biased some potential Alhurra viewers, but the larger challenge over the long run is the growing diversity and sophistication of media, both Arab and foreign, in the Middle East. Gaining and keeping audience is every media outlet’s daily preoccupation, and Sawa and Alhurra are no different. While Sawa’s unique format and programming mix know no rivals in the region, in places like Jordan and Egypt copy-cat stations have emerged. Alhurra, on the other hand, is in a fiercely competitive satellite TV arena, which will only grow in intensity.

In addition to competition from other media, Sawa faces uncooperative governments in selected countries. Sawa is an FM network, yet Saudi Arabia and Egypt have not yet made FM licenses available, despite repeated BBG requests. Cross-border AM is the back-up distribution means, but it is neither the preferred mode of radio listening nor ideal for Sawa’s format.

While Sawa reaches large numbers of youths, the youth market will only bear so much news. Reaching them with information requires great skill and creativity. Our research shows that Arab youths prefer short but frequent news updates on the radio. That is why Sawa broadcasts news twice an hour 24/7.

Much has been made of Sawa and Alhurra’s “media war” with Arab networks. We are not in a media war with al Jazeera, al Arabiya, or any other Arab network. We are keeping our eye on the ball—promoting freedom and democracy—using objective journalism as our tool.

Al Jazeera and al Arabiya transcend traditional media roles. They function, in effect, as quasi-political movements, reflecting two of the defining characteristics of the Middle East today. One is the lack of political and press freedom. The other is Arab nationalism. Arab networks manifest both. They cover the news Arab regimes suppress, and they cover the news that implicitly reinforces the fiercely nationalist perspective of many Arabs. There is constant coverage on al Jazeera, al Arabiya, and other Arab networks of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S. intervention in Iraq. They are eminently newsworthy topics and, at the same time, topics that intensely arouse Arab passions.

Needless to say, it is neither Sawa nor Alhurra’s mission to become the voice of the Arab people in their grievances against Israel and the United States. We are also not expecting to take al Jazeera or al Arabiya’s audience.

We are happy to share audiences that naturally turn to indigenous news sources, often first.

Marrying the Mission to the Market in the Middle East

In the face of enormous political antagonism and media challenges, how do Sawa and Alhurra take their mandate from Congress—to promote freedom and democracy through objective journalism—and make it resonate with the largest possible audience?

To capture the attention of listeners and viewers, Sawa and Alhurra have developed unique listening and viewing propositions, respectively. That is, they each offer Arab audiences something desirable they do not already get on other radio and TV outlets in the Middle East.

Radio Sawa is designed to be a forward-looking, optimistic, empowering radio station, an example of the American spirit of openness to new ideas and cultural diversity. The station's unique blend of Western and Arabic popular music reaches out to the wide Arabic youth audience. Its up-to-the-minute comprehensive news gives listeners of all ages in the Middle East the kind of dependable radio news source not available elsewhere.

Alhurra is designed to appeal to a broad Arabic-speaking audience interested in fresh perspectives on the news and “food for thought” on a variety of subjects from health to technology to news from the world of entertainment. The station's respect for its audience and message of personal empowerment is in stark contrast to the messages of victimization put out by the major government-controlled TV channels in the region.

Neither Sawa nor Alhurra is international broadcasting in the traditional sense. Both are conceived to be local in flavor yet American in spirit. They radiate respect for the individual and the free marketplace of ideas. They reach out and connect with audiences that are overwhelmingly hostile to U.S. foreign policy but attracted to many things American—most of all, the American idea of personal freedom. By exemplifying freedom and democracy, rather than by preaching freedom and democracy, Sawa and Alhurra seek a permanent place in the Arabic-language media scene.

While strategically positioned, Sawa and Alhurra are also attractively presented. Sawa is a seamless radio product with industry-leading production values that projects an upbeat, inviting, and contemporary sound and feel. Alhurra is visually stunning television from its trademark Arabian horses to its expertly crafted station IDs to its state-of-the-art studio sets. The stations are a pleasure to listen to and watch. Manifesting the imagery of the modern Arab world, we believe they will increasingly become an integral part of the daily lives of Arabs across the Middle East.

Formatting on radio, as noted, is key to building audience. People seek predictability with radio, and a consistent format—be it news, talk, sports, music, or some other—ensures that. Sawa has a unique format among major radio stations in the Middle East, blending Western and Arabic

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popular music. This combination successfully draws large audiences of young Arabs. The fact that Sawa broadcasts around-the-clock rather than in short, daily transmission strengthens the appeal of the format. Audiences know what to expect with Sawa, and they can have it whenever they want it.

The Middle East is a complex region with major differences across countries in culture and language. So, Sawa takes its innovative approach to programming a step further. Based on the same format, Sawa broadcasts six different programming streams in recognition of the region's differences.

There is a separate stream that reflects local music tastes and language dialects for Iraq, Morocco, the Gulf, Egypt, Jordan and the West Bank, and Sudan and Yemen. This regionalization of format makes Sawa, in effect, six separate radio stations.

Positioning, branding, and formatting are each important to the key tasks of attracting an audience and to fulfilling our mission. But audiences are not just drawn to media because of the way a radio station sounds or a TV station looks. They are often in search of news as well as music or entertainment. And, of course, disseminating news and information is the core BBG mission.

Sawa and Alhurra share the same news director, the same professional standards, the same regional and global network of correspondents, and the same commitment to covering the news straight. They report the news without opinion and politically charged adjectives. With flexible programming formats and correspondents worldwide, Sawa and Alhurra are able to interrupt regularly scheduled programming and mobilize to cover any story, anywhere, anytime.

Sawa has one of the largest Arabic-language radio news departments in the world, with correspondents and stringers throughout the Middle East and beyond. The station broadcasts over five hours of news each day in

325 newscasts per week. Every hour at 15 and 45 minutes past the hour, Sawa provides 5-15 minute updates. Keeping the news concise and direct specifically serves the needs and preferences of youths. Unlike the censored media in much of the Arab world, Sawa's news is accurate and objective, presenting U.S. policies in their proper context. Newscasts focus on the most important events in the region and the world, tailored specifically for the Middle East audience. Sawa programming streams share the same news content, except for the Iraq stream, which features more news overall and targets its news to Iraq.

Of Alhurra's 24-hour schedule, 14 of those hours are news and information. On Alhurra-Iraq that number rises to 17. Alhurra features two hour-long newscasts daily in primetime along with daily talk shows and roundtables to examine in depth all sides of the most important news stories of the day. The channel routinely reports on human rights abuses and political demonstrations. It also features the ongoing transition to democracy in Iraq. Alhurra, for example, was the only Arabic-language channel to broadcast the first meeting of the Iraqi National Congress in its entirety. Showing examples of democracy in action constitutes poignant programming in a region of non-democratic governments.

While Sawa and Alhurra provide audiences with up-to-date news and information, to meet the preferences of Arab audiences, both stations also air a wide range of current affairs programs, editorial comment, lifestyle shows, and hourly interactive features. These are designed to broaden our audiences' view of the world and foster political expression.

Sawa, for example, broadcasts numerous regular features that support the freedom and democracy mission and encourage audiences to expand their world. These include:

- **The Free Zone:** Sawa's signature program on freedom and democracy issues in the Middle East, including interviews with democracy advocates throughout the region on human rights, freedom of the press, elections, women's rights, and related topics.
- **Ask The World Now:** An innovative presentation of U.S. policies and editorial comment that uses statements from senior U.S. policymakers.
- **SawaChat:** Sawa's flagship interactive feature, broadcast hourly, providing the audience an opportunity to express opinions on political and social issues of interest to Arab youths in response to the question of the day.
- **What's New:** An upbeat feature program focusing on

happenings in literature, the Internet, DVDs, cinema, music, science, and technology. Presenting Arab and Western culture in the same context, the program promotes openness to new ideas and acceptance of regional and national differences.

- **You and Your Health:** Authoritative information about personal health and fitness.

Like Sawa, Alhurra complements its daily newscasts and newsbriefs with a host of current affairs discussion programs as well as lifestyle features that not only inform but also expand audience awareness of the world around them. These include:

- **Free Hour:** A one-hour daily talk show, examining the latest news and issues with expert analysis and debate.
- **Alhurra Presents:** An hour-long weekly conversation with a prominent newsmaker.
- **All Directions:** Weekly talk show with newsmakers and experts on topical issues in the Middle East.
- **Free Debate:** Weekly one-hour talk show that tackles social issues in the region, including family issues such as spousal abuse.
- **Talk of Two Rivers:** Weekly talk show that provides in-depth analysis of the previous week's events in Iraq.
- **Alhurra Sports Weekly:** A focus on Middle Eastern sports.
- **Cinemazine:** Profiles a different movie each week, with actor interviews and background footage.
- **I-Tech:** Brings the latest in computer and information technology to the Middle East.
- **The New Explorers:** Documents the most important scientific work of our time.

Obviously, the best programming is for naught if it cannot be heard or seen. It was the BBG's success in acquiring FM broadcast licenses in key

Recognizing that Arab and Muslim audiences rely on satellite television and radio, the government has begun some promising initiatives in television and radio broadcasting to the Arab world, Iran, and Afghanistan. These efforts are beginning to reach large audiences. The Broadcasting Board of Governors has asked for much larger resources. It should get them.

—The 9/11 Commission Report

Middle Eastern cities that launched Sawa as a viable local broadcaster, and the surety of being accessible on ArabSat and NileSat that put Alhurra in the satellite TV game. To be sure, there are ample virgin broadcast areas in which to establish new FM stations. Sawa's distribution remains very much in a growth mode.

Initial Success: Key Research Findings

Performance measurement in any enterprise takes place relative to the mission. Our mission is to promote freedom and democracy through objective journalism, so we want to know, whom are we reaching, and do our audiences trust what we air, specifically the news?

Weekly audience is a measure of those who listen at least once per week. By capturing information this way, we learn regularity of use, an important nuance, for it implies commitment on the part of the listener or viewer. Weekly listening or viewing measured repeatedly is thus more than just a simple snapshot in time of how many people happened to be tuned in. We are pleased that both Sawa listening rates and Alhurra viewing rates show extraordinary audience acceptance thus far.

News reliability measures listeners' and viewers' assessment of the news component of the programming. This information is extremely useful as an indicator that people listening to attractive music or features do not simply tune out when the news comes on the American stations. As data presentations in the next section will show, news on both Sawa and Alhurra score high for reliability among audience members.

Sawa and Alhurra are products of intensive market and audience research unprecedented in U.S. international broadcasting. Knowing how to position, brand, program, and distribute them has required in-depth understanding of the media environments and the target audiences. Programming concepts and prototypes are routinely vetted in focus groups. Exploration of how best to cover sensitive content issues is carried out through in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Musical preferences are surveyed weekly in selected cities across the region. The aim is to ensure an overall approach and specific content that meets audience needs while fulfilling the BBG mission.

We use research not only to drive Sawa and Alhurra performance but also to measure it. Twice yearly, independent surveys by ACNielsen sweep across a group of Middle Eastern countries, focusing on places where Sawa has local distribution. These surveys have given us a clear sense of how Sawa and Alhurra are doing according to the measures just discussed.

We are very encouraged by what we see. Both Sawa and Alhurra are still young. Because of the media and political challenges they face,

we never expected them to become market leaders overnight. In fact, we never expected them to have the market acceptance they have already won. The targets we set for official government measurement were ambitious by the standards of government-supported international broadcasting—at 5 percent weekly audience for Sawa and 10 percent for Alhurra— and we have far exceeded those almost everywhere.

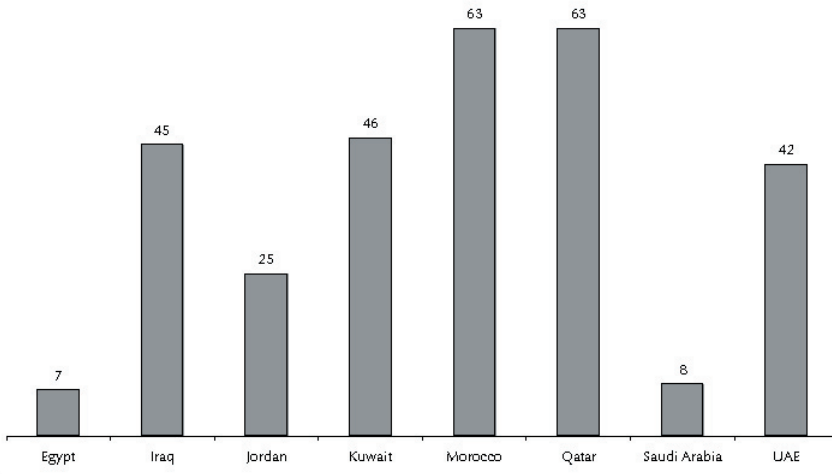
The following charts tell a compelling story.³ They speak to some of the frequent questions surrounding Sawa and Alhurra since their inception: Would Arabs even bother to tune in U.S. government-supported stations? Would Arabs, feeling the hostility they do toward America, trust the stations, especially for news? Would Sawa attract Arab youths but fail to draw older, presumably more mature, adults? Would Sawa draw a mass audience at the expense of an “elite” audience? We now have answers to these questions, and they are uniformly positive.

Sawa does exceedingly well in attracting broad audiences of all ages wherever it has local FM distribution (FM being the best method of transmission to reach a young audience), as shown in figure 2. In those local markets, Sawa is consistently among the most popular radio stations. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Sawa is available only on cross-border AM (approval of BBG requests for FM licenses is still pending in both countries). As a reference point, among weekly listening rates for all U.S. international broadcasting language services, the median is roughly 6 percent.

Within its target audience of 15-29 year-olds, Sawa does even better (figure 3). Morocco and Qatar listening rates, in the mid- to high-70 percent range, are among the very highest rates ever recorded for U.S. international broadcasting services. I would reiterate the strategic importance of this demographic, constituting 60-70 percent of populations across the Middle East and being a prime age for recruitment into radical political/religious movements.

3. Research findings presented here for Sawa and Alhurra are based on surveys conducted by ACNielsen in Egypt, UAE, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia in August 2004 and a national survey of Iraq conducted by a separate research group also in July-August 2004. Findings for Sawa from an ACNielsen survey in Qatar in March 2004 are also included. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Arabic with the following sample sizes: Egypt (2,007), UAE (1,202 in Abu Dhabi and Dubai only), Kuwait (1,501), Jordan (1,500), Morocco (1,325 in the seven cities where Radio Sawa is on FM), Saudi Arabia (2,001), Qatar (1000 in Doha only), and Iraq (2,500). Surveys included 50 percent men and 50 percent women representative of key demographic groups in terms of social class, education, employment, size and type of household. Margin of error: +/- 2.6 percent. The results from urban surveys cannot be projected to the national populations of these countries as they were conducted in major cities and were not intended to be national in scope. The urban centers sampled would constitute 20 percent to 30 percent of the home populations.

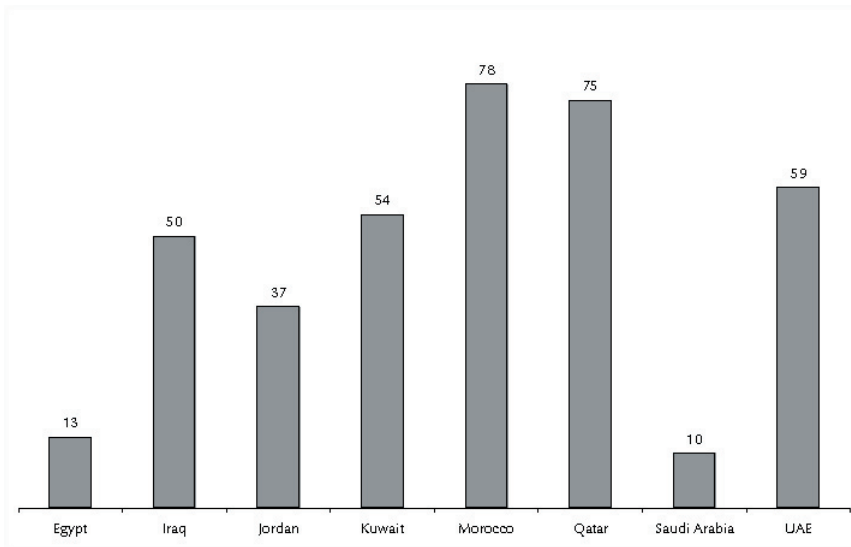
FIGURE 2. Radio Sawa weekly listenership (percent of general population age 15+)



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors data, 2004.

Note: The standard measurement for government-supported international broadcasting is weekly, meaning listening at least once during the seven days prior to the survey, per the industry standards set by the Conference of International Broadcasting Audience Research, London.

FIGURE 3. Radio Sawa weekly listenership (percent of general population 15-29)



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors data, 2004.

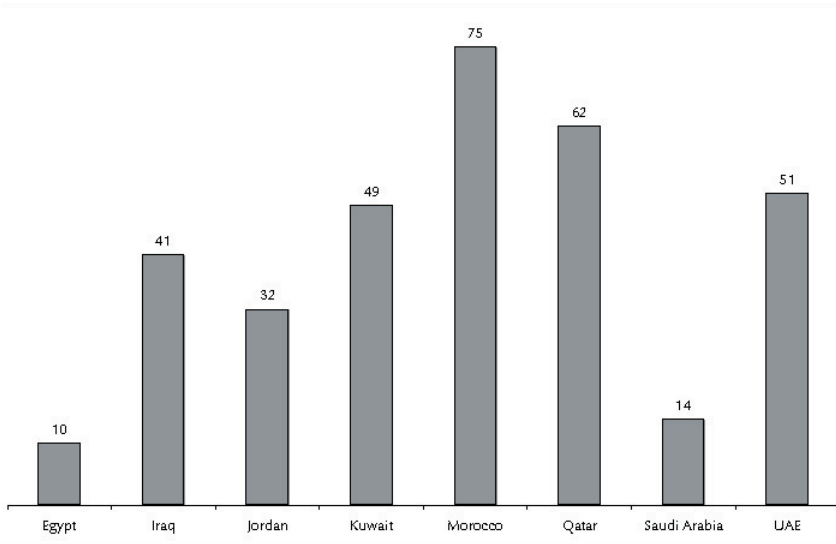
Listening to Sawa among elites is also high, confirming that attracting a mass audience does not preclude reaching elites as well (figure 4). This is a significant finding in light of the public diplomacy debate over elite vs. mass audiences. Sawa shows that gaining both is possible.

It is essential to Sawa's success that it not only reach large audiences but that those audiences trust the news it broadcasts. Findings on Sawa's reliability, illustrated in figure 5, confirm that Sawa is a trusted source. That such high rates of news reliability would emerge among populations that are uniformly anti-American is remarkable and attests to the professionalism of Sawa's news programming.

The BBG has been conducting quantitative studies of Sawa since shortly after the station's debut two and a half years ago. The findings presented are broadly consistent with what we have seen all along. Sawa's staying power, its ability not only to attract but also to retain large audiences that trust its news, is further evidence of its success.

Alhurra, in contrast, had only been on the air six months by the time of the surveys in August 2004. A limited telephone survey in April 2004 had provided a glimpse of its early reach, but now we have more robust data to make a more complete assessment (figure 6).

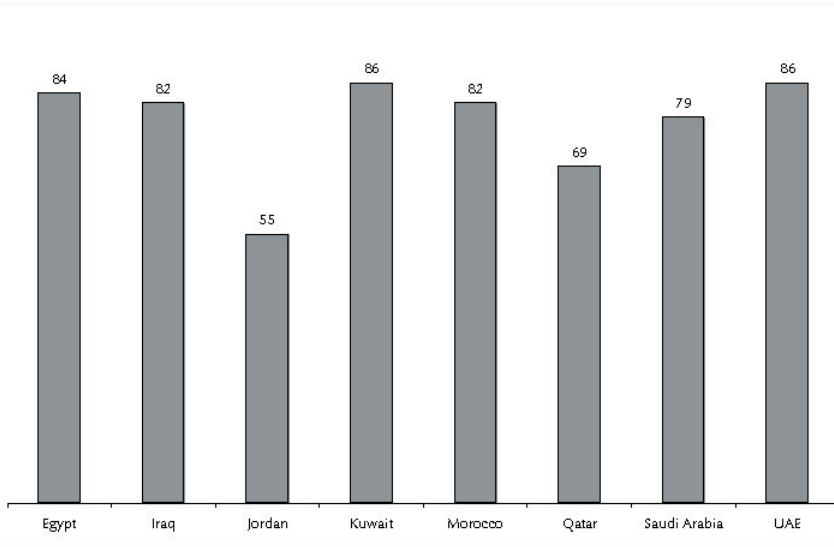
FIGURE 4. Radio Sawa weekly listenership (percent of "elites," social classes A&B)



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors data, 2004.

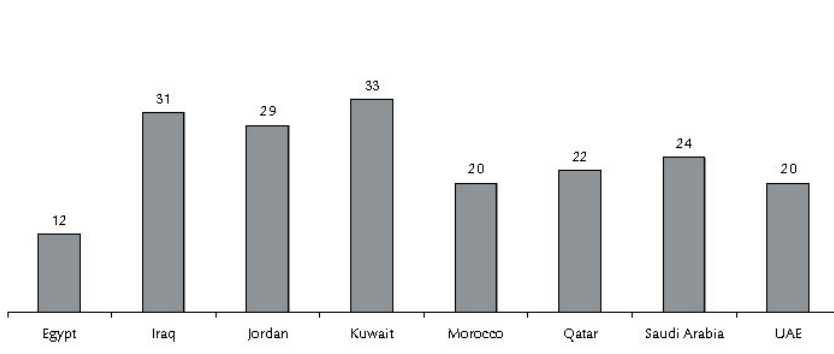
Note: Social classes A&B refer to society's well-educated managers and professionals per the industry-standard A-E classification of the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research.

FIGURE 5. Percentage of weekly listeners answering the question “How reliable is the news and information one can hear on Radio Sawa?” with “very or somewhat reliable”



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors data, 2004.

FIGURE 6. Alhurra TV weekly viewership (percentage of general population age 15+ in households with satellite reception)

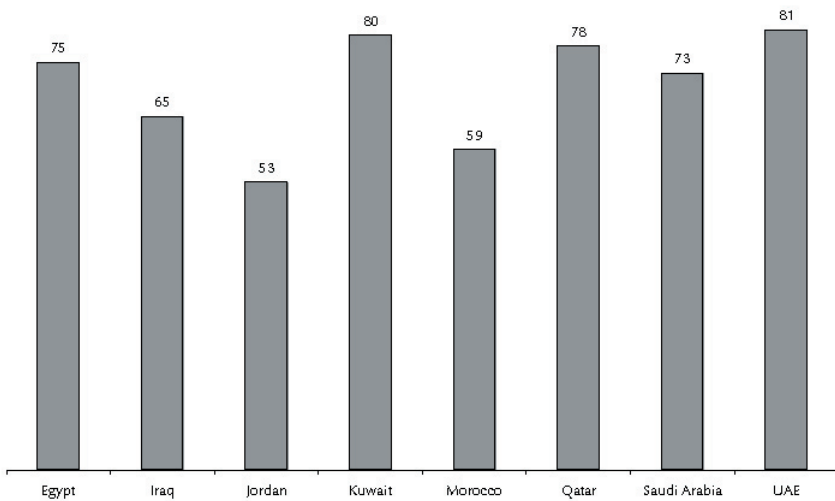


Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors data, 2004.

These levels of viewing for Alhurra indicate that the station has begun to establish an audience at levels that are very good for a new market entrant in a crowded media environment. Especially given the anti-Americanism in the region and the negative comments in the Arab press about Alhurra, this early success is encouraging.

The news reliability data for Alhurra are also encouraging, for the same reason cited above for Sawa (see figure 7). It seems reasonable to assume that record Arab hostility toward the U.S. would all but rule out any U.S. government-sponsored media outlet being seen as trustworthy. That this has not proved true augurs well for Alhurra's prospects to build a larger audience over time.

FIGURE 7. Percentage of weekly Alhurra TV viewers answering the question, "Do you think the news on Alhurra is very reliable, somewhat reliable, neither reliable nor unreliable, somewhat unreliable, or very unreliable?" with "very reliable" or "somewhat reliable"



Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors data, 2004.

In sum, research shows that Sawa and Alhurra have achieved excellent results so far. Where it has FM delivery, Sawa is often the number one station in its individual markets, not only among international stations but also among all stations. In a field dominated by al Jazeera and al Arabiya, Alhurra has particularly stiff competition arrayed against it. But for a recently created foreign station, it has done quite well. Both stations achieve very good news reliability scores, even in the pervasive anti-American atmosphere into which they broadcast. In addition, recent

qualitative research has shown the appeal of non-hard news programming that provides important social, cultural, and economic content. We have every expectation that both stations will get even stronger, and that Alhurra will gradually build its audience.

Building on Success

Odds are, had anyone proposed three years ago that today we could have some 24 million Arab adults tuned in weekly to U.S.-supported radio and TV services, he would have been lampooned. But that is exactly what we now have. Opening new channels of mass communication with the people of the Middle East is a vital contribution to overall U.S. foreign policy goals in the region.

As we build on Sawa and Alhurra's success, we need to bear in mind what they are aiming to do. They seek to promote freedom and democracy over the long run through objective journalism. In doing this, they not only present the news but also present a forward-looking vision for Arabs of all ages, one based on hope and opportunity for a better life. Critical to Sawa and Alhurra's success is to attracting and retaining large audiences who trust the stations' news and information.

Only by playing it straight with skeptical Arab audiences can we hope to have the necessary credibility to ensure success. The Board and the managers of Sawa and Alhurra must do whatever is necessary to safeguard the stations' editorial integrity. For, if we lost our credibility, we would lose any ability to exercise the power and influence of broadcast operations that manifest the best of a free press in the American tradition.