

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

U.S. Arab-Language Broadcasters Fail as Bureaucrats ^[1]

The public scolding took place right after the long Labor Day weekend, perhaps not to spoil anyone's vacation. Setting atop the office desks of those who manage the U.S. government's Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN) when they returned to work was a terse report on their failings. It was not that their charges, America's Arabic-language Radio Sawa and TV Alhurra, were putting out inferior broadcasts. Rather, the folks in charge of those broadcasts were not running things like good bureaucrats. What exactly does that mean? The report by the General Accountability Office, said the MBN was not churning out enough paperwork. That was the overarching complaint. There was no criticism of what Radio Sawa and Alhurra were putting on their broadcasts. It was what the broadcasters were not doing, outside of public view.

America's Arab language broadcast executives were taken to task for several bureaucratic infractions by GAO investigators. For one, the MBN was faulted for not generating enough paperwork to document "a long-term strategic plan." Next, the MBN managers didn't have enough meetings, said the GAO. "For example, the MBM...has not convened a meeting of its internal control board to formally develop its controls and coordinate audits." In addition, the MBN was criticized for not having adequate risk assessment or staff training plans. Finally, questions were raised about the veracity of the audience ratings surveys conducted for the U.S. Arabic broadcasters.

The U.S. government's General Accountability Office routinely conducts investigations for the Congress and the president, then publicly issues its reports. The GAO assesses whether public funds are being spent wisely on behalf of taxpayers. That makes good sense, of course.

GAO investigators who toil with their green eyeshades affixed as they pour over mounds of paper can proudly point to several significant investigations that they conducted thus far this year. The GAO studied the financing of state highway projects, investigated how to improve Medicare physician services, evaluated the U.S. military's recruiting efforts, and assessed the Coast Guard's preparation and response to Hurricane Katrina, to name just a few of the GAO's many worthy projects in 2006.

Perhaps the Middle East Broadcasting Network managers should have paid more attention to the GAO's findings and conducted more meetings, developed a mission statement and strategic plan, and done a risk assessment. But potential audiences don't really care.

The several broadcast newsrooms in which I have worked had very simple mission statements and strategic plans. They were etched in our psyche, and were not on paper. Our mission, which most of us understood, was to gather all the relevant news, present it clearly and objectively, generate "enterprisers" or exclusive stories of our own, and above all beat the pants off the opposition. I'm sure the broadcasters at Sawa and Alhurra feel the same way. If

everyone performs consistently and professionally and stays on top of events, and is not overtaken by them, or what the competition does, the audience will come.

So far as Radio Sawa is concerned, its audiences like what it does with its mix of news and mostly music, and in just a few years it has become dominant in a very crowded Middle East radio market, even though it may be faulted by the GAO for not having a proper internal strategic plans and the like.

Its sister TV facility, Alhurra, while it reaches more than 20 million viewers each week according to Nielsen ratings, when measured in head-to-head competition with other news channels such as Al- Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, it is not yet up there.

But given the interest of the GAO in audience ratings for America's Middle East broadcasting facilities, we must take the watchdog agency to task for overlooking a glaring management flaw that it should have caught. And this oversight goes right to the top, to the White House. When the administration announces a major news story...the zapping of terrorists such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, or when President Bush announces new guidelines on interrogations of detainees, instead of giving Katie Couric an exclusive interview, break the news stories first on Alhurra and Sawa. If those facilities don't have anyone like Katie or NBC's Brian Williams -- but a known broadcaster with credibility in the Middle East -- find one, and fast. The audiences will come, and return often. But even so, do your paperwork.
