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America's Arabic News Channel Gains Audience ^[1]

The American government's satellite news channel, Alhurra, while still well below the audience ratings of the well-entrenched Arabic TV news channels, appears to be catching on with audiences in the Middle East.

During this summer's Israel-Hezbollah war, which greatly boosted TV news viewing habits throughout the Middle East and elsewhere, Alhurra finally earned mention in honest-to-goodness competitive TV audience surveys, one conducted in the Middle East's largest commercial marketplace, Saudi Arabia. Previously, Alhurra relied on its own commissioned TV surveys which provided cumulative audience figures over a week or two, without listing the competition's cumulative audience size, or Alhurra's competitive standing.

During the month of September, when more stable viewing habits were in play following the war, the independent TV rating service IPSOS-STAT, in its "day after" report of actual TV viewing, ranked Alhurra number 56 out of the top 100 Middle East Satellite channels viewed in Saudi Arabia. While that may not sound impressive, at least America's Middle East TV channel is now ranked, which, much like in college football, raises attention. There are also hundreds of satellite channels competing for viewers in the Middle East.

While rated well behind news leaders Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera, Alhurra shows up far ahead of the American news channel CNN, which ranks 83rd. In Saudi Arabia, Alhurra was also ranked ahead of other Middle East channels including those of Syria, Oman, Qatar, and Jordan in September. It also ran ahead of the U.S. Discovery Channel's Animal Planet, which ranked 79th.

In July and August, with the Israel-Hezbollah war raging, IPSOS-STAT's rating surveys ranked Alhurra number 54 in the United Arab Emirates; number 85 in Egypt, and a stronger number 32 in Kuwait, well ahead of CNN and CNBC. During the war, Al Jazeera showed up a strong number one in most places.

Because the Israel-Hezbollah war coverage attracted many more viewers than normal to TV news programs, it can also be assumed that Alhurra collected its share of first-time viewers. If viewers liked what they sampled, Alhurra's upward blip in Middle East TV ratings competition could have longer term value for the channel, and for U.S. government public diplomacy.

Alhurra debuted February 14, 2004 to provide an alternative TV news outlet in the Middle East from America. It now goes 24/7, and includes its separate service for Iraq, and Europe.

By comparison, the UK's Arabic TV voice is still clearing its throat backstage. The BBC's Arabic TV Service was a short-lived partnership with a Saudi Arabian holding company, and the enterprise folded in 1996. It will have taken the BBC more than a decade to re-coup with

an Arabic TV service, presently scheduled to debut late next year, starting with a limited broadcast schedule.

The UK, America's closest ally in the Middle East, is also a step behind the U.S. in servicing Iran with a TV service. A BBC-TV Persian service to Iran is planned to begin limited programming in two years, while the U.S. has funding from Congress to expand its existing TV service to Iran to 12 hours per day.

As it is said, half the battle is getting there, and in that sense, it is fair to compare Alhurra's Middle East TV efforts with that of the highly respected BBC. Although it may be too early to tell, even though many in the Middle East may not like U.S. foreign policy, more people are paying attention to it as presented on Alhurra. It could start a dialogue -- the prime objective of public diplomacy.
