

Dec 05, 2016 by **Ahmed El Gody**

Prospects on U.S. Diplomacy in the Arab World ^[1]

Why Do Arabs Ignore Al Hurra?

If you think Arabs don't watch Al Hurra because of its U.S. agenda or credibility, you are wrong. It is not because Al Hurra comes from Virginia, USA that Arabs don't tune to Al Hurra, as Arab citizens are still fond of MBC channels that produce 24/7 American entertainment and news. So the idea that Arabs prefer Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya over Al Hurra has to do with the programs presented in the channel.

When Al Hurra debuted, it produced programs for an average American Joe, showcasing the best of U.S. entertainment sports -- NBA, NHL and NFL -- that Arabs don't even watch. Al Hurra's programming also featured stand-up comedians making jokes about matters that Arabs don't understand, alongside documentaries and programs that seemed better targeted for audiences in Seattle or Miami, not Baghdad or Rabat.

When Al Hurra pulled itself from the Americanization trap by changing its programming policy to focus on Pan Arab news production to provide an alternative to sweep-taking Al Jazeera, it was not a success.

The problem again was not because the news is made in the USA, as Arab citizens do still consume CNN and BBC heavily, further the level of foreign news credibility is higher than regional ones (because Arabs still fear the idea of a hidden agenda presented by Pan Arab nations). In an informal survey about the expected reopening of BBC's Arabic service, over 80 percent of respondents stated that they will believe BBC because it is credible.

Al Hurra did not attract Arab audiences because it spoke with the wrong tone of language and it was not loud enough to make an impact.

The Arab audience is sentimental -- unlike presented in Hollywood movies that portray Arabs as merciless butchers. To be successful in sending a message you have to speak to the Arab hearts before Arab minds. For example, Al Jazeera in its early debut, won wide audience during the Al Aqsa Intifada in October 2000 by speaking to the senses of the Arab audience. Footage of the 12-year-old Palestinian, Muhammad al-Durra, being shot by Israeli soldiers while held in his father's arms were more dramatized by creating a popular song "Jerusalem shall return to us," and sold to the world. Since then Al Jazeera news-formula was simple: strong footage + poetic words= larger audience

Al Hurra on the other hand presented textbook news format. Further it was presented in a too professional format to an audience that grew to hate professionalism in news. It reminds them with governmental protocol news. They hated it! The rise of independent newspapers and

private satellite channels do witness that Arabs need a change in the way to be approached.

Al Hurra offers lame reporting and programs, maybe it is part of the professional act? That doesn't work either. During the past 10 years over 300 satellite stations emerged... to be viewed a channel needs to be loud. Programs that are widely viewed offer loud debate, controversial issues that create discussions that stimulate audience and make them interact. Again a formula successfully presented by Al Jazeera programming presenting an array of loud programs that present controversial discussions.

For example, Al Jazeera's Opposite Direction program, modeled on CNN's Crossfire, is perhaps the most watched program on Al Jazeera. It is anchored by Dr. Faisal al-Qasem, a Syrian citizen who studied drama in London believing in the role of art and drama in social change. The show's formula is simple, two guests who have completely opposite opinions argue about a controversial topic whereas Al Qasim stirs it up. Screaming, shouting, threats, insults, marching off set, are all characteristics of the program and during which news and debates break.

The problem with Al Hurra is that it is not approaching the hearts of an ever growing passionate Arab audience, they need to break their formal tone speaking to the heart of the audience, but that again needs to be done with a twist, it has to be loud enough to break through the 300 other satellite channel to be heard. It can be done again understanding Al Jazeera technique of breaking scandals! But that is another story.
