

Nov 04, 2016 by [Lawrence Pintak](#)

War of Ideas: Score another one for the bad guys ^[1]

(Cairo) Sunni-Shia power politics and U.S.-Egyptian relations have come head-to-head in a dispute over a satellite television station that is the latest weapon in the arsenal of Iraq's insurgents.

Al-Zawraa, a television version of the now-infamous jihadi websites, is being broadcast across the Arab world by Nilesat, a satellite provider answerable to the Egyptian government. The Iraqi station features non-stop scenes of U.S. troops being picked off by snipers, blown up by roadside bombs and targeted by missiles.

"We find the channel utterly offensive," said one U.S. diplomat. Getting the Egyptians to pull the plug is "at the top of our agenda."

But the Egyptian government insists it's all just business.

"For us, it means nothing," Egyptian Information Minister Anas el-Fiki told me. "It is a channel that reserved an allocation on Nilesat. They had a contract, paid the fees. There is nothing political for Nilesat. It's pure business. We have no concern what the channel is doing."

But, as is often the case in the Middle East, much more is going on beneath the surface. The diplomatic tug-of-war over the station comes as Sunni Arab governments in the region, increasingly worried about a resurgent Iran, are more overtly lining up behind Iraq's Sunni minority. Just last month, a Saudi close to his government wrote in the Washington Post that Saudi Arabia would take steps "to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis."

Those militias have something in common with the U.S. and Iraqi governments; they, too, want the Egyptians to pull the plug on al-Zawraa, which laces its anti-American programming with attacks on the Shiites. In one montage, the Iranian flag is superimposed over the faces of Iraqi Shiite leaders – including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Graphic "crawls" at the bottom of the screen contain such messages as, "The natural place for criminals and thieves is with the mafia of Muqtada Al Sadr," a reference to the most militant Shiite militia leader.

El-Fiki says Egypt received "a warning from certain Iraqis" that if they don't stop broadcasting al-Zawraa, the Egyptian diplomatic mission in Baghdad will be attacked. "We don't accept this type of warning," he insists.

"In other words," I asked the information minister, "even if you wanted to shut it down, you wouldn't because it would look like you were backing down?"
"Exactly."

Despite Egyptian protestations that there is nothing political about their involvement, Cairo is

doing more than just re-transmitting al-Zawraa's signal. In early November, around the time Saddam Hussein was sentenced to death, the station shifted from pushing a hard-line Sunni political message to serving as an overt arm of the Islamic Army of Iraq, said to be dominated by former Baathists. Using a mobile transmitter, it began playing a cat-and-mouse game with Iraqi and U.S. military authorities.

In mid-December, according to Nilesat chief Salah Hamza, the signal went dead. Since then, the Egyptian satellite company has been retransmitting the same few hours of tape at the request of al-Zawraa officials. "They asked us, please when we don't send, loop for us what you have." Technically, this means that rather than just up-linking a signal originating in Iraq, Nilesat is actually transmitting al-Zawraa from Cairo.

It's a subtle, but very important distinction: An arm of the anti-American Iraqi insurgency transmitting from the capital of one of America's strongest Arab allies. The implications are not lost on Hamza, who became cagey when asked what Nilesat would do if al-Zawraa provided it with new tapes, instead of just asking it to rebroadcast the old ones.

Al-Zawraa's fare includes programs such as Juba: Baghdad Sniper, chilling footage of unsuspecting U.S. soldiers caught by the camera in the seconds before – and during – their assassination, complete with slow-motion, instant replay of the blood-spray at the moment of impact; montages of American military vehicles and civilian tanker trucks as they approach and are destroyed by roadside bombs; and behind-the-scenes shots of insurgents preparing and firing missiles.

In one English-language hour-long program, aired a week before Christmas but not seen since, the narrator addresses himself to President Bush, referring to dead U.S. soldiers in Iraq as "miserable nobodies." The program combines scenes of the preparation of car bombs, missile attacks and comments from alleged insurgent commanders with footage of U.S. soldiers storming homes, torture at Abu Ghraib, scenes from Top Gun, Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech, Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 and the final evacuation of Vietnam. The narration mixes warnings – "From now on, we are focusing our efforts on specific targets" including "high ranking officers and VIPs to make you bleed to death" – and sarcasm: "Your enlistment qualifications are kind of comical. Thirty-nine years old? You're recruiting nannies?" Somewhat bizarrely, video "bumpers" between segments feature actor Anthony Quinn in his role as the uncle of the Prophet Mohammed in the 1976 movie The Message.

The failure of U.S. officials to get the Egyptians to pull the plug on al-Zawraa underlines the complicated nature of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship and the limits of American influence in the new regional equation. It is also another example of the emerging Cold War between Iran and Sunni Arab powers in the region.

The Egyptian information minister has appointed a team to monitor the channel and provide him with a report, but, he says, the government can only take action if the channel has violated "the major codes of ethics of the pan-Arab media" and it receives a formal request from the Arab League, which, not incidentally, is seen by Iran as a tool of Sunni Arab power.

Having failed to convince the Egyptians to act – el-Fiki claims he was approached "in a friendly way" by the U.S. ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone but has received no formal request – the Americans had hoped Iraqi President Jalal Talabani would raise the issue with President Mubarak, but the Iraqi leader's December visit was cancelled. However, the man said to be the station's founder, former Iraqi Member of Parliament Mishan al-Jabouri, was

recently in Cairo.

So for now, the insurgents have their voice and the Middle East has yet another of its countless inherent contradictions: The U.S., which is demanding freedom and democracy in the Arab world, wants a TV station muzzled; Egypt; whose prisons are crowded with home-grown Islamists and whose own media is tightly controlled, is defending the insurgents' right to their electronic pulpit.

Lawrence Pintak is director of the Adham Center for Electronic Journalism at The American University in Cairo and author of Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens: America, Islam & the War of Ideas. Email: lpintak-AT-aucegypt.edu.
