

Nov 04, 2016 by **Lawrence Pintak**

War of Ideas: Insurgent Channel Coming to a Satellite Near You ^[1]

(Cairo) -- A controversial TV channel that is the voice of Iraq's anti-American insurgents look set to launch another front in the propaganda war against the U.S.

The head of al-Zawraa, which airs footage produced by the Islamic Army of Iraq, says he has finalized a deal for the channel to be distributed on three European satellites, including one seen by American viewers.

The move comes as U.S. officials are pressing Egypt to stop transmitting the channel via its Nilesat satellite.

Al-Zawraa is a television version the now-infamous jihadi websites, featuring non-stop videos of attacks on U.S. troops, alleged American atrocities and behind-the-scenes footage of insurgents preparing operations, all carrying the logo of the Islamic Army of Iraq, a key Sunni Muslim insurgent group said to be comprised of former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party.

In a telephone interview from his headquarters in Damascus, Mishan al-Jabouri, a former member of Iraq's parliament and the public face of the channel, said al-Zawraa will soon be carried "on three satellites from European countries." But he would not say which ones. "In the right time you can know ... because we are really afraid of American pressures. But after we transmit [from Europe] there will be no fear anymore because we will be on the air."

Al-Zawraa began transmitting graphic images of anti-American violence via satellite after the Iraqi government closed down a much more muted version of the station around the time Saddam was sentenced to death in mid-November.

Since then, according to al-Jabouri, his teams in Iraq have sporadically managed to feed video to Cairo "through SNG," which apparently refers to the same kind of portable satellite dishes used by television news teams to transmit their material from the field. He says the material is recorded on a "server" in Cairo, then forwarded to Nilesat. "And it keeps transmitting even if we are not transmitting from Iraq," he adds. Much of the footage is shot on inexpensive video cameras and cell phones.

The Bush administration has so far failed to convince Egypt to pull the plug. But al-Zawraa's apparent deal for European distribution is insurance.

"If the Egyptians submit to U.S. pressures, the Europeans will not," says al-Jabouri.

So far, repeated "unofficial" requests by the U.S. embassy in Cairo, ostensibly on behalf of the Iraqi government, have fallen on deaf ears. Last week, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters it was his "understanding" that "the broadcasts had ceased" and

that "at least in the immediate term, the Iraqi government's concerns have been addressed." But McCormack obviously didn't check with anyone who owns a satellite dish in the Middle East, where the broadcasts continue uninterrupted.

U.S. efforts to silence al-Zawraa are complicated by regional politics. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's critical comments about the Saddam execution and the U.S. over the past week underline an increasing tendency on the part of his government to distance itself from Washington and identify more closely with Sunni Arab interests.

The Egyptian media has given scant coverage to the dispute, emphasizing that there has been no "official" request from the Americans to shut down the channel. Information Minister Anas el-Fiki, who says Nilesat's contract with al-Zawraa is "pure business," last week told this writer that he had appointed a team to study al-Zawraa's programming, but Nilesat chief Salah Hamza says he has so far heard "nothing direct" from the minister.

The Cairo connection has so far been crucial for al-Zawraa. Though he is based in Damascus, al-Jabouri says Syrian authorities have prevented him from establishing studios there. Al-Zawraa mixes its anti-American message with sharp attacks on Syria's ally Iran.

The insurgent channel's impending European satellite carriage is likely to spark a new flurry American diplomacy, testing al-Jabouri's conviction that the Europeans won't cave to American pressure. France, after all, shut down retransmission of Hizbullah TV station al-Manar, the first channel included on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

Al-Jabouri won't say which satellites will carry his channel's signal, but he claims one can be seen in the U.S. and promises that much of the future material will include English narrations or sub-titles. "We are really interested that the American audience will know what their government is doing in Iraq," he says.

Correction: In a piece on al-Zawraa last week, I reported that a shot of Anthony Quinn dressed in Arab robes frequently appears between segments on the channel. I erroneously reported that the clip came from a 1976 movie in which Quinn played the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, an alert Arab journalist colleague pointed out, the clip is actually from Moustapha Akkad's film *Lion of the Desert*, in which Quinn played the national Libyan folk hero, Omar Moukhtar, a Sunni Muslim who fought the Italian army.

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