

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Global Warming at Arabic News Channels ^[1]

Tempers at the TV newsrooms of Al Jazeera and Alhurra are flaring with the summer heat, so one can only imagine what August may bring.

Journalists at Al Jazeera have begun leaking stories to the media and Western politicians, expressing fears that new members of its board of directors in Doha, Qatar, including the former Qatari ambassador to America, Hamad Al Kuwari, will pressure AJ's journalists to go soft on Washington to curry favor with the Bush administration. This follows leaks from the newsroom at Alhurra, America's Arabic news channel, where news coverage had too hard an edge for some, when terrorists and Holocaust deniers were provided airtime, all of which led to the "resignation" of the channel's news chief.

To help make the case for Al Jazeera's rank-and-file, a member of the British Parliament, George Galloway wrote in *The Guardian*, "The evidence is clear that the U.S. government is using its influence to neuter the station's independence," by packing its board of directors.

U.S. journalist Danny Schechter warned, "Is There a 'Foxification' Underway at Al Jazeera Television," ending his piece by proclaiming, "Let Al Jazeera Be Al Jazeera."

Although we have observed no suggestion that Board changes at Al Jazeera could be business motivated, it cannot be discounted. Al Jazeera's Arabic news channel has an estimated budget of at least \$100 million per year and has been in the red since its inception over 10 years ago.

Al Jazeera's benefactor, the emir of Qatar, had anticipated U.S. advertising dollars from AJ's English channel through carriage on U.S. cable outlets in the major markets from New York to Hollywood. Instead, Al Jazeera English is on the Internet, for subscribers, and also on Buckeye Cable channel 220 in Toledo and Sandusky Ohio, and the City-owned cable channel in Burlington, Vermont, population 38,000.

All of which the emir hardly counted on.

Nigel Parsons, managing director of Al Jazeera English, told the Associated Press: "It's extraordinary that while the rest of the world is happy to watch us... the U.S. stands in splendid isolation."

Ratings for the parent Al Jazeera Arabic channel are also flat; more fodder for the new board.

Al Jazeera trails Al Arabiya in audience ratings month-after-month in Saudi Arabia, which accounts for 70 percent of Middle East advertising dollars. Ratings in Saudi Arabia for May, 2007 compiled by the Independent Middle East polling organization, IPSOS-STAT, show "day after actual viewing" with Al Arabiya at 19.5 percent of adults 15-years-of-age or older, and Al Jazeera at 14.6 percent.

The same pattern holds in Iraq, where the latest ratings show Al Arabiya at 41.29 percent, and Al Jazeera at 18.39 percent.

Alhurra has only a trace audience in Saudi Arabia, but has moved up in ranking ahead of Syrian TV and CNN, just behind the top 50 channels. In Iraq Alhurra has reached up to 2,185,000 viewers. While only half of Al Jazeera's audience in Iraq, it's respectable nonetheless for the relatively new interloper broadcaster from near Washington, DC.

To get a harder edge to its offerings, Alhurra axed "Inside Actors Studio," which it had run repeatedly, and now "most of the documentaries we are airing come from PBS," according to Communications Director Deirdre Kline. Alhurra is acquiring fewer programs and producing more of its own. "We get a lot of email feedback for 'Equality,' our program on the rights of women, and 'i-TECH,' Alhurra's technology program."

The BBC plans to introduce its Arabic TV service early next year, with this new competition likely to be on the agenda for both Al Jazeera's new board of directors, and the managers and news staff at Alhurra, as temperatures in the dog days of August soar in their respective newsrooms.
