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Alhurra Locates the “Arab Street” [1]

The much maligned Alhurra, the U.S. government's Arabic TV service, is now a "go-to" news channel in Iraq, one of the largest TV markets in the Middle East of more than 28 million population. Because of its growing number of viewers in Iraq, Alhurra can now lay claim to its legitimate connection with the mythical "Arab Street,' a term which writer Amir Hamzaway says elites use "in the absence of independent public opinion surveys, in representing their own quite ideological views as those of the Iraqi majority and as those of Arabs generally."

The latest TV ratings from the commercial Middle East polling firm Ipsos-MENA, report that Alhurra’s Iraq channel has a larger daily audience in that country than the much heralded Al Jazeera.

Among the hundreds of TV channels available in Iraq, most beamed by satellite, Alhurra ranks as the 12th most-watched, while Al Jazeera is ranked 15th. A year before, Alhurra trailed Al Jazeera in Iraq with less than half its audience.

IPSOS-Mena’s most recent TV ratings, taken in Iraq between March and May, 2008, show Alhurra with a daily reach of 17.68% of adults 15 years of age and above, who watch Alhurra for at least 5 minutes daily, while Al Jazeera has 14.67% of adult daily viewership. Alhurra is seen daily by some 2 million, 652 thousand adults in Iraq. (By comparison, America’s popular Cable News Network, CNN, has a domestic daily adult audience in the U.S. of 191,000 viewers, according to the Nielsen rating service).

Several factors contribute to Alhurra’s success in gaining substantial TV viewing in Iraq. Together, a model emerges for what the U.S. government channel can accomplish elsewhere in the Middle East to boost its Arab audience base.

One example: In Iraq, Alhurra has provided easier public access to its broadcast signal. In addition to the availability of Alhurra Iraq via Arabsat and Nilesat, where satellite dishes and additional electronics are required to access signals, Alhurra has increased the number of its terrestrial transmitters to 5 metropolitan areas within Iraq, so that its programs can now be received by standard TV antennas atop TV sets or on rooftops. Those terrestrial transmitters are located in Baghdad (Ch.12); Mosul (Ch. 12); Basra (Ch. 3); Al Hilla (Ch. 35): and Tekreet (Ch. 3). Perhaps Alhurra could negotiate the rights to have its own terrestrial transmitter locations in Saudi Arabia, for example, where it has only a trace audience, and in densely populated Egypt.

Secondly, Alhurra carries "local" Iraq-specific programming tailored for viewers in that country. Alhurra's special Iraq TV service is one of three distinct program "streams" which comprise Alhurra’s separate networks. In addition to its special program stream exclusively for Iraq, there is also a program stream targeting Arabic speakers in Europe, and Alhurra's basic satellite stream available throughout the Middle East, where the channel competes with hundreds of other channels, thus receiving a smaller share of available audience. Perhaps

there should be an Alhurra Egypt stream of programs and a special program stream for Saudi Arabia as well, and so on.

All this should be taken into account by the Obama transition team, which is looking into ways to shore up U.S. government broadcasting abroad. Building upon the success of Alhurra Iraq would be a good place to start.