

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Obama Interview Underscores the State of Mid-East Television ^[1]

It should come as no surprise that President Obama granted his first formal TV interview to the Middle East Arabic channel Al Arabiya. In the Middle East, the moderate news channel Al Arabiya drubs other Arabic news channels in popularity, including the controversial Al Jazeera and the U.S. government's Al Hurra,- the latter of which is getting better numbers than before, but nothing to match Al Arabiya's.

According to exclusive TV audience ratings provided to me by the Middle East's Ipsos-Mena audience polling organization, President Obama's interview on Al Arabiya had an estimated total TV audience of almost 13,000,000 adult viewers, based on the total penetration of that channel in 11 Middle East countries:

Jordan	538,010
Bahrain	60,970
Iraq	4,943,400
Syria	1,611,882
Oman	387,072
Qatar	46,283
KSA(Saudi Arabia)	2,996,032
Kuwait	158,987
UAE	362,160
Egypt	1,434,267
Lebanon	423,108
Total	12,962,172

Al Arabiya, headquartered in Dubai, receives funding from the Saudi government through a holding company. It would become the favorite channel for the Bush White House when it sought mass audiences in the Middle East (although the *Washington Post* in its account of Mr. Obama's first formal TV interview mistakenly referred to Al Arabiya as "one of the largest English-language TV outlets aimed at Arabic audiences," which misses the point entirely of reaching most Arabs, not only English-speaking Arabs).

Back in April, 2006, when I reported for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy and the *Middle East Times* that the latest Arabic TV audience ratings showed Al Arabiya doubling Al Jazeera's TV viewing numbers in Saudi Arabia, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld gave Al

Arabiya an exclusive interview in which he defended the treatment of Iraqi prisoners. Al Jazeera and Al Hurra got some exclusive interviews along the way during the Bush years but the flow was in Al Arabiya's direction for getting the attention of official Washington.

So where does this leave Al Hurra, the US government's Arabic channel, when it comes to getting out the word in the Middle East? As I reported earlier, Al Hurra is beginning to trend upward in audience ratings, now topping Al Jazeera in Iraq. Why? It tweaked its news with a local content stream, and found how to transmit the channel's TV signal into more homes. All this is worth a try to build audiences in other Middle East countries, and attract White House attention in the process, if the tweaks work.

The bottom line, of course, is to have the right message.
