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Arabic Satellite Channels At War In The Middle East ^[1]

With armies of reporters from Al Jazeera and Alhurra and slews of other news media organizations covering the Middle East, one wonders how the seeds of anti-government sentiment in Egypt were not detected before streets were filled with protesters and now police violence and death. Diplomats in Washington and other world capitals seem to have been similarly blindsided.

The Arabic satellite channel Al Jazeera has been a primary source for breaking visual coverage of this unfolding news story, and the channel can be expected to solidify its base of viewers and be exposed to potential new viewers. But the same can be said for the US government's Arabic channel Alhurra, which does not get the media attention enjoyed by Al Jazeera, but in its quiet way is making sizable audience inroads abroad. It is one of the most popular TV channels in Iraq, because in addition to being accessible via satellite dishes, it has several terrestrial transmitters in that country, which greatly expand its viewer base. In Egypt, Alhurra exceeds the combined weekly audience of other government channels including BBC Arabic and Russia Today.

Al Jazeera and its advocates are pointing to the channel's coverage of the uprising in Egypt as another reason why more cable channels in the US should carry its programming. That's a hard sell with all the US commercial channel competition, and the fact that much of Al Jazeera's content is of little interest to US audiences.

Although Alhurra is separate and independent from the US State Department, behind the "firewall" of a Broadcasting Board of Governors, its value for US public diplomacy abroad cannot be overstated. As Alhurra works to broaden its viewer base, it should have the full weight of the White House and the State Department behind the effort. Providing a news exclusive to Alhurra once in a while would be a good start. CNN used to be the satellite channel that was turned on in foreign ministries abroad. That could be changed to Alhurra without compromising its editorial independence in any way.
