

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

## **Hughes Discusses New Strategies For Broadcasting in the Arab-Muslim World** <sup>[1]</sup>

The Bush administration is beginning to provide specifics on how it plans to shape up U.S. public diplomacy and effectively introduce American ideas to the Arab and Muslim world.

Karen Hughes, undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs and a confidant of President Bush, testified before the House International Relations Committee last week in “An Around-the-World Review of Public Diplomacy.”

In her revealing statements, Hughes disclosed details of recent meetings with State Department officials abroad who will soon take on new public diplomacy responsibilities, and discussed her closed-door meetings with officials who oversee U.S. government international broadcasting services.

Secretary Hughes told the Congressional oversight committee that there will be more regional media activity by American diplomats in the Middle East, especially by U.S. ambassadors and American public affairs officers there, and more frequent appearances by U.S. spokespersons on the high-profile Arabic satellite news channel, al-Jazeera.

Her goals are reminiscent of the former U.S. Information Agency before it was disbanded in the 1990s, where emphasis was placed on interaction between highly skilled USIA public diplomacy officers abroad and local media. As in the days of the USIA, Washington will help shape the officers’ messages and the job performance of U.S. diplomats in the field will be evaluated partly on their public diplomacy abilities.

Secretary Hughes told the House International Relations Committee some of what she learned on her recent “listening” trip to the Middle East, for which she was largely reviled by local media and reporters who traveled with her.

“I’ve met with ambassador after ambassador,” she said, “and I’ll say ‘What are you doing about public diplomacy in your country?’ and they say ‘We talk to this newspaper and that newspaper,’ and I’ll say ‘Do people in your country get most of their news from newspapers?’ and they say ‘No, they get it from al-Jazeera.’ And I’ll say ‘What are you doing about al-Jazeera?’ And that’s why I’m looking at a regional platform to put regional Arabic speakers on al-Jazeera.” Hughes said that American spokespersons will also be available for the U.S. Arabic channel, Alhurra.

Hughes said she is aware that there has been a debate about whether it’s wise to place administration spokespersons on al-Jazeera because much of its reporting has been “inflammatory and frequently wrong, and based on rumor and innuendo.” But she argued that al-Jazeera “reaches a wide audience and I feel that if we’re not appearing on that station, we’re missing an opportunity to communicate with a whole lot of people.” She added that the

U.S. will continue to complain to al-Jazeera when it looks as if the channel has distorted the facts or been guilty of misinformation.

Hughes also talked to the committee about what has been going on in meetings of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, a federally funded agency that acts as a so-called “firewall” to protect the U.S. government’s non-military broadcast services—such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Alhurra—from outside political influence.

Secretary Hughes sits on the BBG and told Congress that while she is mindful of the need to keep the administration’s agenda at a safe distance from broadcasts to the Arab-Muslim world, she still takes the State Department’s “strategic priorities” into consideration in her work on the Board.

“Despite the firewall, there are opportunities of some synergy,” she emphasized. Hughes mentioned that in one of the early BBG meetings she informed the group that the Department of State “brings student clerics from the Middle East to the U.S. so they will have an opportunity to see what our country is really like,” including visits to mosques and synagogues. Hughes suggested such visits should not be off limits to news cameras.

“Wouldn’t it make sense for our Arabic-language station, Alhurra, to do a documentary about that exchange program and share it with a much wider audience? I think we can do things like that and not breach the firewall, and make our broadcasts and public diplomacy more effective.”

More openness by U.S. diplomats and U.S. officials in the Middle East, and the fact that the Bush administration understands that its best conduit to reach the Arab street is al-Jazeera, opens potentially rewarding new pathways for American public diplomacy abroad. Karen Hughes apparently knows that she can come close to the firewall, but can’t touch it, and her ideas for program content would seem to have some foreign policy heft that has previously been missing from U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

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