

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

Alhurra's Struggle For Legitimacy ^[1]

Alhurra needs a facelift.

The ratings of America's Arabic TV channel are flat among Iraqi audiences, the Bush administration is turning elsewhere to reach Arab and Muslim publics abroad and Congress is poised to debate Alhurra's future.

As a result, Alhurra appears to be seeking a harder edge to its programs in an effort to attract viewers and to make the channel a more popular platform for the discussion of U.S. foreign policies. A recent public opinion poll confirmed that such changes must be made if Alhurra hopes to survive in such a competitive market.

IPSOS-STAT, an independent Middle East market research company, shows that Alhurra is making a lackluster showing in head-to-head popularity competition of channels available in Iraq.

The most popular TV channel in Iraq remains Al-Iraqiya, with 46 percent of respondents calling it their prime source of news. Al-Iraqiya is the former state-run network that is now funded by the Pentagon and has been managed with the help of U.S. consultants. The channel, which has held the top ratings position for the past two years, has the advantage of being available in Iraq through a regular, old-style TV rooftop antenna without the need for a satellite dish.

In second place at 41 percent is Al-Arabiya. Bankrolled by the Saudi government, it is by far the strongest pan-Arab satellite news channel in Iraq, followed by the local, privately funded Al-Sharkiya with 39 percent. That channel features such popular programs as home rebuilding (which the station helps to fund), and an Iraqi-centric, Saturday Night Live-esque satire show.

The next most popular news channel in Iraq is Al-Jazeera at 23 percent, whose relatively poor showing is because there is an "official government ban" on the channel and "many Iraqis dislike Al-Jazeera because they don't like its coverage or resent its allegedly pro-Saddam coverage (before and after) the war," according to Marc Lynch in his Abu Aardvark blog.

Next are the two Middle East Broadcasting Corporation's news, information and entertainment channels, at 20 percent and 19 percent.

Eventually, you will find Alhurra in eleventh place with 14 percent popularity. The U.S. government-funded effort has both a pan-Arab satellite channel and a channel specifically targeted for Iraq.

The facts about this struggling network are not lost on the Bush administration.

Marc Lynch said he recently saw "a CENTCOM (U.S. Central Command) spokesman on Al-Jazeera to talk about the allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Iraq, and both

President Bush and Condi Rice have given exclusive interviews to Al-Arabiya recently."

As reported here last week, Karen Hughes, the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, said that more Bush administration spokespersons would appear on higher-rated Arabic channels since the goal is to reach the largest audience possible. Although Alhurra can expect the same access, U.S. policymakers' decision to work with the competition shows they understand that the network does not reach some of the most coveted viewers.

Alhurra's struggles may stem from the soft nature of some of its acquired programs. Among the most popular on the network are "Inside the Actor's Studio" from Bravo, "Hollywood Couples" and "Cinemagazine," which appear mostly during daytime and cater to stay-at-home women. Some news and discussion programs reach these midday viewers, but a network's competitiveness is primarily gauged by its ability to hold a prime time audience. That is when most Iraqi men come home from work, and, as the poll shows, Alhurra isn't exactly captivating them. However, programming that should appeal to this critical demographic is on the way.

Alhurra has signed a one-year agreement with BBC Worldwide for a package of 45 documentaries, news and current affairs programming to bolster its schedule. Boston's public television affiliate also sold the network episodes of its "Frontline" series, including "Rumsfeld's War," an examination of the charge that the U.S. Army "is on the verge of being broken" and the man considered responsible.

The network is even developing its own talk show called "Inside Washington," which will look at how decisions are made in the nation's capital. Former Alhurra critic Robert Satloff is slated to host the potentially contentious show, which should ensure good, illuminating discussion.

These are positive first steps, but the Bush administration must realize that to lift Alhurra in the ratings battle, news and documentary broadcasts must confront and air out the White House's more politically sensitive issues. If they desire a return on investment in international broadcasting, programming will need to be controversial to create the buzz that's been missing from it.

For instance, the network should show a slam-bang discussion following the broadcast of "Rumsfeld's War" that offers both sides of the war issue. It's a hot topic that can draw viewers, but it would also be an opportunity for Alhurra to build the credibility that Middle East audiences say it lacks.

If those in charge don't want to take the risk, they will need to be content with being in eleventh place in the war of ideas and serve up another rerun of "Hollywood Couples."
