

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

## Who Does the TV News Work For? <sup>[1]</sup>

Amman, Jordan

Ra'ed Qaqish is the sort of person the United States is supposed to be reaching out to. He wants to be friends with the United States, but just now he is feeling slighted.

Qaqish is a freshman member of Jordan's parliament. A Christian in his early 40s who represents the town of Salt, about 20 miles west of Amman. He arrived late for our lunch explaining by way of apology that he had been with the mayor of Salt discussing his idea to establish a sister city agreement with Burlington, Vermont, which he visited last year.

Over the last few months Qaqish has gained more than his share of notoriety because of a high-profile legal battle in which he is now embroiled. In mid-July he appeared on Al-Hurra, the US-funded Arabic-language TV news channel that is supposed to be a rival to better known, longer established news operations like Al-Jazeera. Qaqish debated the Palestinian issue with an Israeli and a Palestinian spokesman. The anchor was in Virginia, the Israeli was in Jerusalem, the Palestinian in Ramallah and Qaqish here in Amman. Qaqish says he restated long-standing Jordanian government positions. Stripped of the diplomatic verbiage these amount to: the Israelis need to lighten up, take the process seriously, treat the Palestinian leadership as equals and agree to an honorable deal; and that the Palestinians have Jordanian's full backing, but Amman thinks it would be nice if they, too, tried a bit harder. This is hardly earth-shattering stuff.

After the interview the Engineer's Syndicate (a trade organization, membership in which is mandatory to work as an engineer in Jordan) expelled Qaqish and denounced him for violating its policies against 'normalization' by appearing on the same program as an Israeli spokesman. Qaqish is suing the syndicate.

All of this struck me as odd because since the advent of Al-Jazeera nearly a decade ago Israeli spokesmen are no longer an unusual sight on Arab news stations. It is true that direct debates are somewhat rare these days, but it sounded as though something else was going on here. What, I asked, was the syndicate really mad about. Was it that he had debated Ra'anan Gissin, a right-wing Israeli spokesman who is particularly adept at getting under the Arab world's skin, or might it have been that he did so on Al-Hurra?

"Both," Qaqish answered, adding, only half-jokingly, "I really believe Al-Hurra should pay me money because I've increased their viewership."

"Basically, I was left alone. OK, I'm a firm believer that one has to pay a very heavy price for democracy, but how can I be influential? A lot of people in Salt see me as a guy who believes in change, and that the only way to bring change is through democracy and modernization. But how can you do this without resources? Without back-up?" Qaqish feels he went out on a limb for Jordan, the United States and for his own belief in cross-cultural dialogue. He feels slighted because throughout his very public battle with the syndicate no one from the US

embassy has called to offer him any moral support.

As a journalist I'm, frankly, glad the embassy has not called. If Al-Hurra is ever going to convince people it is a legitimate media operation and not a US propaganda outlet pats on the back from the state department will not help its cause. The fact that Qaqish thinks he should have received such a call says a lot about where he thinks Al-Hurra's ultimate loyalties lie. I suspect that is not quite what the administration had in mind when it launched the station last February.

Personally I have never thought Al-Hurra as bad, or as propaganda-laden, as its reputation. A lot of people in this part of the world (the engineers syndicate, perhaps, among them) never gave it a chance for the simple reason that it is US-run. It is a problem of expectations the station's management needs to address. As a news operation Al-Hurra needs to book rising local leaders like Ra'ed Qaqish on its programs, but it also needs to make them understanding that by appearing they are not doing Washington a favor.

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