

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Election Propaganda ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

A few days ago The Washington Times wrote glowingly of election coverage plans at Al-Hurra, the US-funded Arabic-language satellite TV station. Correspondents all over the place. US-style rolling coverage of the returns as they come in. A slew of pre-election documentaries and talk shows designed both to air the issues at stake and to teach people the mechanics of voting.

The paper did not seem to be aware that there are actually two Al-Hurras. A regional network and a secondary feed called “Al-Hurra Iraq”. I get both versions here in Amman and, as far as I can tell, the blanket coverage is airing mostly on Al-Hurra Iraq. There was no mention of Al-Iraqiyah, the local TV and radio network the US runs out of Baghdad as the successor to Saddam’s official state-run television. Al-Iraqiyah, like Al-Hurra, has cost US taxpayers around \$100 million. Al-Iraqiyah (which rolled out a brand-new studio this week) is also trying to gear up for coverage of the January 30 elections. What it and Al-Hurra have in common just now is that both are engaged in agenda-television and, in the process, neither is doing any great favors for either their Iraqi viewers or for the US image in the region.

Al-Iraqiyah is particularly unsubtle. A newscast I watched earlier this week consisted mostly of reports about the election from around Iraq. These were numbingly repetitive: a succession of man-on-the-street interviews in which ordinary Iraqis praised the elections and said what a good thing they will be for the country. Essentially the same report was presented from five different cities. I was glad to see that they are getting some news from outside Baghdad, which used to be a problem for Al-Iraqiyah, but disappointed that everyone seemed to be reading from the same script. Al-Hurra is slicker, but the gist is the same: elections are good and anyone who questions this is bad.

(Full disclosure: I ran the news department at Al-Iraqiyah for four months in late 2003 and early 2004. I also wrote for the Washington Times, as a Cairo-based free-lance correspondent in 1993-94).

The original charge for both Al-Hurra and Al-Iraqiyah – that they become independent, Western-style news outlets – is undermined by this kind of ideological cheerleading. Yes, American media routinely encourage people to vote. There’s nothing bad in that per se. American media do not, however, make getting-out-the-vote the near-exclusive focus of their election coverage. Moreover, their urgings come in a society where the underlying legitimacy of the democratic system is essentially unquestioned.

There are a lot of real issues that need to be aired in Iraq, some of which do not necessarily reflect well on the current electoral process: Should the vote be postponed? Or at least spread out over a period of days or weeks (this should not be such a strange idea: Indian general elections routinely stretch over two or three weeks) to allow a greater concentration of security

forces as each city or region votes? If no significant voting can take place in Sunni areas can, or should, anything be done to rectify the composition of the resulting National Assembly? Should the first priority of the new government be security? Infrastructure? Fighting poverty? How much power should the new government have. The main task of the Assembly elected on January 30 will be to write a permanent constitution. What do the country's main political players think that constitution should look like?

You don't hear a lot about this on the American-backed stations. And since everyone involved knows these issues are, in fact, out there (and are being debated vigorously in other Arab media) that makes the US-backed stations look like old-style propaganda tools. Slicker looking propaganda tools than Saddam had at his disposal, but flacks for the regime nonetheless. And if there's one thing Iraqis are very good at spotting it is a media outlet flacking for those in power.

All of this is important because the stations actions reflect back on us, their American sponsors. Al-Hurra, government-financed and operating from studios in the Washington DC suburbs, is unquestionably an exercise in public diplomacy. The public diplomacy component of Al-Iraqiyah, run with US government money but overseen by outside consultants and staffed by Iraqis, some of whom worked for state television under the old regime, is less obvious but exists just the same. Crudely put, everyone in Iraq knows the US is, ultimately, running the TV station. That makes it a public diplomacy outlet for better or worse.

Once again our efforts to get out a basically sound message are so heavy-handed that they risk backfiring. The result will be a further loss of credibility for two TV channels that could serve as real outlets for open discussion about Iraq and its future... and a further loss of credibility for the people back in Washington who are paying the bills.

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