Throughout its four-year existence, Al Hurra, the U.S.-backed satellite channel available throughout the Middle East, has been embroiled in controversy. Launched soon after the invasion of Iraq, Al Hurra was tasked with the goal of accurately representing U.S. policies and opinions in the region in an effort to combat the rise of anti-American sentiment. Further, Al Hurra was supposed to provide high-quality journalism that would both result in a more informed and democratically engaged Arab citizenry and improve the quality of journalism throughout the region.

To date, Al Hurra has failed to achieve its goals, and this study argues that there are four primary lessons that can be taken away from Al Hurra’s failure: (1) editorial independence is essential to having any say in informing Arab public opinion, and it must be achieved both in practice and in the eyes of audiences; (2) brands matter, and Al Hurra’s name and mission are grounded in presumptions that trigger Arab impressions of America as an imperial power, the exact impressions that public diplomacy efforts should be trying to combat; (3) understanding and adapting to the Arab media environment are essential for a broadcaster’s success; and (4) the traditional benchmarks used to measure the success or failure of international broadcasting ventures must change to reflect the long-term goals of the U.S. government’s overall public diplomacy efforts.

The Rise of Al Hurra

Al Hurra—“The Free One”—is a U.S. government-funded broadcaster available throughout the Middle East. Established in February 2004,
Al Hurra TV, along with its FM radio counterpart, Radio Sawa (launched in 2002), represent America’s largest commitment to public diplomacy in the region. From 2002 through 2008, the U.S. government has invested just less than $500 million dollars in the two broadcasters.

Overseen by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an independent agency reporting directly to Congress, Al Hurra’s mission is to promote freedom and democracy in the region through the accurate and objective representation of U.S. policies. One of the BBG’s responsibilities is to serve “as a firewall to protect the professional independence and integrity of the broadcasters,” including Al Hurra.1 Broadcasting from Springfield, Virginia, the station’s programming includes a mix of traditional newscasting, cultural programming, political talk shows, documentaries, as well as American entertainment programming dubbed into Arabic. Both Al Hurra and Radio Sawa operate under the umbrella of a nonprofit corporation, funded by Congress, called the Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN).

Before Al Hurra, U.S. broadcasting consisted of a resource-strapped Voice of America (VOA) Arabic that was broadcasting just seven hours a day using “antiquated shortwave and minimal range medium wave transmitters.”2 Competing against a growing number of FM radio and satellite television stations, VOA Arabic programming had a very small audience. Moreover, the failure of the Camp David negotiations to produce a lasting peace in the region and the onset of the second Palestinian Intifada provided the required political urgency for a revamped broadcasting service to the Middle East. Many were openly concerned that a failure to combat hateful and extreme media in the region could result in a culture of violence and terrorism. The terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001 gave the final impetus for plans to overhaul U.S. broadcasting in the region.3

Al Hurra was the brainchild of BBG Board Member Norm Pattiz, founder of Westwood One, the nation’s largest radio network. Pattiz had hoped to establish “one of the largest Arabic-language newsgathering operations in the world” that would look much “like a CNN or an MSNBC or Fox News, or an Al-Jazeera…only it will be much more visually appealing.”4

Al Hurra has three different streams, though there is significant programming overlap between all three: (1) Al Hurra TV, focuses on the broader Arab public; (2) Al Hurra-Iraq, provides news specifically addressing issues in Iraq; and (3) Al Hurra-Europe, launched in August 2006, focuses on reaching Arabs in the UK, France, and Germany.