



Washington's Mideast Messaging Needs an Upgrade | Opinion

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It has become painfully clear that America is losing the information war in the Middle East.

For years, the United States has struggled to engage distrustful regional publics and explain often-unpopular policies. U.S. messaging to the region—which held considerable sway during the Cold War—has receded in resonance, even as more radical and anti-American voices have risen in volume and appeal amid an explosion of satellite channels and digital media. And since the start of the Israel-Hamas war last fall, this state of affairs has worsened still further as regional discourse has become more heated, more polarized, and more rife with disinformation.

That's a massive problem for the United States, which has an enduring interest in remaining competitive in the battle for the "hearts and minds" of regional publics. But where should Washington begin? As policymakers ponder this question, they would do well to focus on three priorities.

First, identify the "pacing threat." Over the past few years, and in spite of deepening partisanship, opinion on both sides of the U.S. political aisle has coalesced around the idea that China represents America's cardinal national security challenge—and that Beijing's economic, political, and strategic priorities should in turn dictate ours.

In the context of Mideast media, though, America's "pacing threat" is undoubtedly *Al Jazeera*. With some 430 million regular viewers, a presence in more than 95 countries and over 70 bureaus globally, the Qatari channel is a media colossus. It is also, as a recent visit to Doha confirmed, committed to a selective, radical, and often deeply anti-Western journalistic agenda. And, thanks to lavish, ongoing subsidies from the Qatari government, *Al Jazeera*'s budget is massive—estimated at \$1 billion or more a year. This virtually bottomless wallet has allowed the network to undergo a landmark expansion over the last dozen years.

America's Mideast broadcasting, by contrast, is significantly more modest. The government agency responsible for outreach to the Arabic-speaking world, known as the *Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN)*, runs the *Alhurra* and *Alhurra Iraq* television channels, *Radio Sawa* and a handful of Arabic language digital platforms that cumulatively cover the entirety the Middle East and North Africa. However, it does so on a comparatively shoestring budget (\$131.3 million in 2023). In an area dominated by Qatari media dollars, these fiscal constraints have made it hard for *MBN* to fulfill its mission of "expanding the spectrum of ideas, opinions, and perspectives available in the region's media" and to "provide objective, accurate, and relevant news and information," to highlight "the plurality of America with various viewpoints and ideas."

Second, Washington should go where the competition can't. Competing dollar for dollar with *Al Jazeera* is simply not practical for the United States, given the vast resources available to the Qatari government. Nevertheless, *MBN* can still make headway, and gain more resonance, in the battle for Middle Eastern "hearts and minds" if it better exploits the chinks in *Al Jazeera*'s informational armor.

The current Israel-Hamas war provides a good case in point. Since the atrocities of Oct. 7 and Israel's ensuing military campaign against Hamas, *Al Jazeera* has provided wall-to-wall coverage of what it has styled as "the war on Gaza," stoking Arab outrage with unsubstantiated claims of intentional Israeli policies of forced starvation and mass persecution. In response, the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided in April to temporarily ban the network from operating in the country. In early June, an Israeli court upheld that decision, citing *Al Jazeera*'s "close connection" to Hamas.

Al Jazeera's ouster represents a strategic opportunity for U.S. reporting, which can take advantage of the resulting opening to extensively cover Israeli decision-making via first-person interviews, in-depth exposés, and investigative research that presents regional publics with a more complete, and nuanced, picture of the current conflict.

Coverage of Iran offers up another opportunity. *Al Jazeera*'s approach to the recent death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash was decidedly circumspect, due to Doha's worries about irritating the Islamic Republic. As a result, the channel's reporting focused strictly on Raisi's official position and policies, with no mention of his direct role in the execution of thousands of Iranian political prisoners in the 1980s—a role for which he gained notoriety as the "Butcher of Tehran."

By contrast, *MBN's* coverage could have focused on Raisi's controversial role, which has led many Iranians to think of him as an enemy of the people—and his death a cause for celebration. Similarly, in their coverage of Iran more broadly, America's broadcasters should work more deeply to engage more deeply with Iranian opposition elements, both inside and outside the country, as a way of demonstrating to Arab publics that there are alternatives to Iran's current, clerical regime.

Third, Washington should popularize the messages it wishes to communicate. The Middle Eastern media scene has exploded over the past two decades. What was once a stagnant informational environment now boasts a slew of media actors who have helped reshape how regional publics consume their news. Notably, though, these outlets are—almost without exception—also looking beyond the Arabic-speaking audience. Virtually all the major players in today's Middle Eastern media scene offer coverage in English as well. As a result, they have positioned themselves as sources of regional information for a key secondary audience: foreign experts, businessmen, and officials who work on the Middle East but don't happen to be fluent in Arabic.

America, though, hasn't done so. While it produces large quantities of radio, television, and digital output, *MBN* currently lacks a dedicated English-language web platform through which it can showcase its coverage. And because it doesn't, non-Arabic speakers are forced to look elsewhere for information about the region—including to *Al Jazeera*, which has made communicating in English a top priority via its *Al Jazeera English* television channel and *AJ+* digital platform.

To be sure, none of the recommendations above are a surefire fix for America's current, rather marginal role in Mideast media. They can, however, help policymakers in Washington begin to think strategically about how to improve America's position in it. It's long past time we start to do so.