
THE OTHER AIR FORCE

U.S. Efforts to Reshape Middle
Eastern Media Since 9/11

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INTRODUCTION

Soft-Psy Media as U.S. Strategy

America is not a subtle nation. This is particularly true in the worlds of media production and Middle East policy, two fields that have rapidly converged over the past two decades. Since 9/11, the broad strokes of U.S. military and political activity in the region spanning from North Africa to Pakistan have, too often, appeared as brash and as full of plot holes as the loudest summer blockbuster. There is thus a temptation to offer definitive, pessimistic analyses of American intervention and go no further. As Iraq smolders and splinters, it seems sufficient to describe the decades-long war as a disastrous brew of classical hubris and postmodern empire. As Afghanistan's nascent democracy trembles, it feels necessary to reaffirm the impossibility and ill wisdom of imposing revolution from without. As Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip approaches its sixth decade, it appears obvious enough that America has neither the domestic will nor the international dexterity to push for a stable peace. Although these stories are far more complex than such dismissals suggest, they paint a powerful picture of American failure in the region.

One might thus assume that America's media strategy in the Middle East must be similarly plagued by ideological rigidity, overreaching ambition, and tone-deafness to local needs. At times, indeed, it has. There is no shortage of examples illustrating America's spotty record of trying to shape Middle Eastern minds through media projects. After the Islamic Revolution, the CIA operated the clandestine Free Voice of Iran radio station, disguising American voices as Iranian and fooling few—if any—into counterrevolutionary action.¹ During the lead-up to the second Iraq War, the United States devoted considerable political and economic resources to Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress for the creation of propagandistic newspapers and radio broadcasts.² They were never produced, serving as a canary in the coal mine of Chalabi's duplicitousness. Even Voice of America Arabic, once the jewel of U.S. public diplomacy in the region, came to be vilified and eventually disbanded, with Newton Minow going as far

1 • SHOPPING FOR GROCERS

The Origins of Middle Eastern Soft-Psy Media

As Edward Said argues in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, the Western world has long engaged in a politics of simplification and essentialism in its representations of the Middle East.¹ Using classic literary and historical examples from Joseph Conrad, Jane Austen, Ernest Renan, and beyond, Said shows that European and American thought about “the Orient” has been plagued for centuries by a tendency to assume that the people of the region fit into eternal, archetypal molds. The backward, mystical, violent, and feminized nature of the Middle East, he demonstrates, is so thoroughly taken for granted in Western storytelling and scholarship that it slides into the background, ever-present but rarely explicated. Inspired by Said’s work, Jack Shaheen updates this thesis in his comprehensive studies of American popular culture, where the prejudicial assumptions identified by *Orientalism* come bursting into the cultural foreground. As Shaheen demonstrates, when Arabs or Muslims show up in American screen media, they overwhelmingly tend to be portrayed as oil sheiks, terrorists, harem girls, or bumbling savages.²

The Western personnel who work with Middle Eastern soft-psy media producers by no means fall prey to this blunt form of thinking. Those Americans and Europeans who devote themselves to foreign service are, most often, acutely aware of the significance, if perhaps not the specifics, of Said’s critique. Nonetheless, the work of international relations requires a certain level of essentialism and, at times, stereotyping. It is simply impossible to plan and execute global strategies that refuse to simplify or summarize the sorts of personalities that make for good local partners. Although soft-psy media projects tend, after years of maturation, to result in relatively nuanced, multilateral relationships, they begin when an American with funding finds a Middle Easterner who fits, more or less, a preconceived mold.

2 • OUR MEN IN KABUL AND BETHLEHEM

Saad Mohseni and Raed Othman

There are intriguing overlaps between soft-psy media intervention and a Cold War spy thriller. Like a Graham Greene novel, the histories of Afghanistan's Tolo TV and Palestine's Ma'an Network are littered with obscure acronyms, inscrutable chains of command, and frequent, sometimes comical, breaches of protocol. Following the tropes of classic spy stories, the histories of Tolo and Ma'an begin with well-heeled, Western cosmopolitans traveling to far-off locales in the hopes of recruiting trustworthy local agents. The world of soft-psy media features secret meetings, armed guards, chance encounters, and backroom deals between local players and government representatives. When they function as intended, they possess the quality of a Tom Clancy Cold War story, with American affiliates operating throughout the world with efficiency and discretion. When they do not, the results look more like Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, in which scaled-up diagrams of vacuum cleaners are mistaken for nuclear blueprints.

And yet, soft-psy media strategy is specifically aimed at undermining any connection between media and covert manipulation. Its ultimate goal, alongside advancing American interests, is to dissociate international media efforts from the U.S. intelligence apparatus, reframing them as local acts of agency and entrepreneurship. As much as America's efforts to shape contemporary media in the Middle East point to the persistence of U.S. hegemony, they nonetheless stand in sharp distinction to the straight psy-ops efforts that marked U.S. strategies throughout the twentieth century.

As Johanna Granville argues, the CIA-controlled Radio Free Europe used its broadcast reach to foment resistance in Soviet-dominated Hungary, playing a role in the country's failed 1956 revolution.¹ In addition to making unrealistic promises regarding American support for local resistance, the outlet also became a factor in destabilizing the government of Imre Nagy, ultimately

3 • KIND OF CON MEN

Self-Interest, Soft-Psy Media, and Resistance

In March of 2009, I stood on a hill in Beyt Jala, flanked by two very different groups of actors. To my north, just outside the gleaming settlement city of Gilo, a group of Jewish Israelis moved frenetically. On most days, the encroachment of Gilo and its people into Palestinian space goes unremarked, a dull pain with which residents of Beyt Jala have learned to live. However, these Israelis caught the attention of the Palestinian film crew that I was observing that day. The settlers, most unusually, were dressed in loose, dark robes. From a distance of a half-mile or so, it appeared as though the crew and I were watching a group of clandestine warriors preparing for a midnight assault. The film crew immediately thought the worst. Although the Jewish-ninjas-training-in-broad-daylight theory seemed far-fetched, Israeli military incursion is too common an occurrence in the West Bank for such a peculiarity not to evoke unease. Perhaps, the crew thought somewhat self-importantly, this was the Mossad, preparing to shut down the production.

Such concerns were, of course, wholly unfounded. The filmmakers were missing a key piece of information. What was just another Monday on one side of the ravine that separates Beyt Jala and Gilo was, on the other, the Jewish festival of Purim. The ninjas were children dressed in costume, very likely practicing a comic *shpiel* to be performed as part of their holiday celebration. Although the plot of this particular play was difficult to imagine, it is certain that things were not as they had first appeared.

The same could be said about the film's cast and crew. Led by Saleem Dabour, the writer who helped author the Ma'an Network's transition toward greater artistic relevance, these actors and technicians had long played their part in the game of Western media assistance. They had produced plays, TV shows, and even a feature film with American and European support, always playing by

4 • SOFT-PSY MEDIA UNDER COVER

The Question of Gender

The autumn of 2001 was a time of optimism for America's War on Terror. As President George W. Bush noted in an October 11th press conference, initial military and political efforts were working in apparent symbiosis. A broad coalition of international supporters had emerged to back the U.S.—and Northern Alliance—led invasion of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the United States was finding success in articulating the war both in military and ethical terms. American rhetoric offered an unapologetic blending of strategic and moral ambitions, putting forth a liberation narrative that suggested no tension between killing terrorists and saving the people of Afghanistan from lives of oppression and violence.

Wanting to expand this sense of optimism and moral/military symbiosis beyond the war theater, Bush refocused the press conference on the home front. Slipping into his trademark, informal mode of address, the president attested that American civilians were also contributing to their nation's firm but just approach to the war. He offered as evidence a brief anecdote: "In many cities, when Christian and Jewish women learn that Muslim women—women of cover—were afraid of going out of their homes alone, that [*sic*] they went shopping with them."¹ Overflowing with metaphorical significance and punctuated with a trademark "Bushspeak" neologism—"women of cover"—Bush's story provides considerable insight into the perspective of the U.S. government at the time. His "women of cover" turn of phrase offers a startling metonymic reduction of an entire population, defining the essence of Muslim femininity by reference to a single article of clothing. It also suggests an ignorance—perhaps strategic—of America's "Judeo-Christian" heritage. Traditional Jewish practice, for example, calls for married women to cover their hair, making it entirely possible that a few of the selfless shopping partners featured in Bush's story were themselves "women of cover." As Kelly Oliver notes, American discourse has a tendency to emphasize the idiosyncrasies and strictures of Islam while ignoring those found

5 • MEDIATING MEDIATIONS

Meta-Media, the Middle East, and Soft-Psy Strategy

On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush convened a joint session of Congress to discuss America's response to September 11th. The military aspect of the speech was both limited and vague. Bush, however, took great pains to establish the context of this war-to-come, paying particular attention to its cultural importance both at home and in the Middle East. The U.S. government, as history would soon show, conceived this war in vast, unprecedented terms, eyeing what Mohammed Nuruzzaman describes as a "historic opportunity for the neoconservative realists to capitalize on an expansionist drive."¹ Bush's speech thus did not simply fixate on military responses to direct, concrete threats. Instead, he used the national audience as an opportunity to describe the Afghan Taliban in terms that made American intervention seem both inevitable and justifiable for reasons beyond terrorism. Most famous among these secondary justifications was the Taliban's denial of basic human rights to both women and minority groups. These anti-liberal tendencies would become central to both popular and official advocacy for the amorphous and loosely defined War on Terror. Bush, however, also took his discussion in a different direction, one particularly suited to impacting the sensibilities of his American viewers: "In Afghanistan," the president noted, "you can be jailed for owning a television."²

The idea of local media (or lack thereof) serving as both a cause for and symptom of defective Middle Eastern societies has permeated American rhetoric since 9/11. In his November 2003 address to the National Endowment for Democracy, for example, Bush positioned "independent newspapers and broadcast media" as preconditions, alongside religious freedom and property rights, for "successful societies" in the Middle East.³ He ignored the radical differences in the both the political systems and mediaspheres of Iraq

CONCLUSION

The Trajectory of Soft-Psy Media from 9/11 to Today

Like all satellite television outlets in the Arab world, the Ma'an Network devotes particular attention to its performance during the month of Ramadan. As Marwan Kraidy and Joe Khalil note, Ramadan serves a de facto "Arab Sweeps" period, with ratings during the month making a tremendous impact on the bottom lines of broadcasters.¹ Anticipating the millions of families who will devote their post *iftar* (fast-breaking) hours to watching TV, major producers such as the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, and Dubai TV spend eleven months of the year preparing for the holy month. Through the production of slick, expensive *musalsalat* (serialized) dramas and high-concept reality TV programming, they hope to gain their share of the Ramadan audience and the ad dollars that come with it.

Ma'an, of course, cannot compete on the regional, pan-Arabic level at which the flashiest, most expensive shows are aimed. They have, however, found considerable success on the national scale, filling a gap in entertainment programming left by the two other major Palestinian broadcasters, Fatah's Palestine TV and Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV. With a stated goal of moving their business model away from donor funding and toward sustainable, ad-driven income, Ma'an has spent years honing its Ramadan strategy not just for greater audience reach, but also for maximum fiscal opportunity. In doing so, Ma'an has, through the development of its production and marketing strategies, shifted its programming consistently toward the soft pole of the soft-psy media continuum.

Ma'an's first attempt at dedicated Ramadan programming came in 2005, with the production of the dramatic serial *Ma Zi Fi Jad*. As discussed in chapter 3, the series was plagued by its commitment to American-imposed strictures, offering blunt messages filtered through onerous "curriculum sheets" authored primarily by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) personnel. The show's poor