America's soft power dysfunctions: When Arab problems are allowed to wash up on American shores

written by Emad El-Din Aysha | March 9, 2009

> Our political organization is thoroughly rotten, almost non-existent. It is Carthagian… Never was there such an absurd waste of power, such ridiculous inconsequence of policy—not for want of men but for want of any effective central authority or dominant idea to make them work together.
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> André Siegfried, England's Crisis, 1931

IN MARCH 2006 I watched a rather striking televised debate between Muwafaq Harb, the (then) unpopular director of Al-Hurra and Radio Sawa, and Democracy Now's Amy Goodman. I found out in 2007 that Harb had been fired. His replacement, CNN's Larry Register, was hired specifically to reverse Harb's course. Hence, this article, which is about America's fast depleting soft power reserves—its ideological- cultural appeal, its image abroad—and how Bush administration policy is speeding up this process of erosion, the hiring of Harb as a case in point. Soft power refers to a country's "ability to get desired outcomes through attraction instead of force." By force we mean hard power (military and economic coercion).[1] In policy parlance it refers to public diplomacy—"short- term public relations: explaining current U.S. policy, circulating speeches"—and cultural diplomacy, involving longer-term initiatives: "academic exchanges… U.S. libraries and American-studies programs, cultivating relationships with writers and editors receptive to America and its values."[2]

The role reversals of war fatigue

BRINGING HARB IN and setting up Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra TV was such a soft power policy of the longer-term kind, a cultural diplomacy move meant to do even more than just improve the impression Arabs have of the U.S. They were meant to reform the Arab psyche in general, away from extremism, fundamentalism and anti-Americanism towards democratization and Westernization. (Not to mention peace with Israel). The argument could always be made, of course, that globalization by itself would do the job for the U.S. of pacifying and modernizing the recalcitrant Arabs. That was the operative assumption in the good old 1990s, an article of faith that took a nasty shock with the fall of the Twin Towers, leading to a major overhaul of older approaches to managing America's image abroad.[3] And so that Al-Jazeera broadcast with Harb put the lie to this whole grand project because it was the American guest who was criticizing the behavior of the U.S. media and its slavish devotion to post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy. The Arab, by contrast, was the one "defending" U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. media, with all the quite explicit anti-libertarian implications involved in such a stance.[4] I suspect this compare-and-contrast was intentional on the part of the ever-shrewd Al-Jazeera producers, showing that even Americans are unhappy about U.S. media coverage of Mideast conflicts, politics and culture. This means, by extension, that this Arab, as an Arab doing America's bidding for it, "must" be untrustworthy at best or downright treacherous at worst. In fact, on the launching of Al-Hurra, the response of Al-Jazeera officials was specifically that "Arab viewers would see the network for what it was, a tool of the American government." Moreover, this handicap

was voiced early on in the U.S. itself, with Edward Djerejian, director of the James A. Baker Public Policy Institute of Rice University, arguing that "We're skeptical that it will be able to jump over this barrier, this obstacle of credibility, in terms of being a state-run media outlet." It is also interesting that this Middle East expert was actually appointed by then Secretary of State Colin Powell to review U.S. "public relations" efforts in the Arab world, a point I will return to below.[5] Something else that struck me, even more so, about the Harb discussion was the peculiar way he went about defending the American media against the charge, posed by Goodman and practically everybody, that it is not representative. ("Harb" means "war" in Arabic). She used the run up to the Iraq War as a case study and how opposing opinions were completely sidelined by the networks and mainstream press. The moderator, Faisal Al- Qasim, posed his own question in this regard, saying that the American media is not the media of the people, representing the people and public opinion. In his response Muwafaq Harb began by saying this was all exaggerated and that the case of the Iraq War was unrepresentative, then took the opposite route in mid-stride by using an example that he saw as more representative. That is, the media coverage of the dispute over the planned takeover of American port facilities by an Arab country and Congress' move to annul this. Harb said that while public opinion polls showed a clear majority against Dubai Ports World taking over ports in six American cities, most American journalists—he cited Thomas Friedman, of all people—were in favor of this move. He then explained that there is a lesson here, that it is not the job of the press just to "beat the drums"—an Arabic expression for congratulating and flattering in a sycophantic way—for the public or the government. He added that there is a "leadership role for the makers of public opinion, a leadership role to make people aware and I think this is the thing that our friend Amy has forgotten." I was positively flabbergasted! This is Arab propaganda mediaspeak, talking of making people "aware" of what actually is good for them whether they like it or not. Fortunately I am not alone in the assessment, as other Arab critics have also noted how the "last thing we expected was for Washington to actually sell us back our poor Arab-made merchandise through Alhurra." Moreover, a great many of Al-Hurra's key employees had actually cut their teeth "under Safwat el-Sherif in Egypt's state-controlled television… an uninspired media that took its every cue from the government and the security services"![6]

The categories of cultural malaise

IN AN ANTHROPOLOGY LECTURE some time ago contrasting the development policies in India and Egypt, the speaker noted that in India the emphasis, following Gandhi, is always on promoting "consciousness" whereas in Egypt it is on promoting "awareness." [7]Promoting awareness means I'm going to make you aware of what is good for you, you ignorant person who is single-handedly responsible for everything that's wrong with our beloved country. And Harb used the exact same Arabic word. It's a very elitist way of talking and thinking and is meant, very explicitly, to prevent social conflict and maintain a harmonious national unity. Indian developmental rhetoric is meant to get the peasant to become politically literate and decide for himself what is good for him and his people, with an explicit understanding that progress necessitates social conflict of some kind. The way Harb is talking also has a distinctly Stalinist feel to it, the idea of the revolutionary intellectual who is the "educator" of the people, the ignorant masses whom he talks down to from up and above. Such intellectuals see themselves as guiding the people like lambs—or cows or camels, depending on your cultural frame—to greener pastures. More usually they direct them to the slaughter. The composition of Al-Hurra's staff, alluded to above, would explain this Stalinist twang as most are Lebanese and cut their professional teeth during the Lebanese "civil war, with attitudes and ideologies typical of that era."[8] (The rest are Iraqis.) Apart from the tremendous damage this will do to America's increasingly depleted soft power resources—making the US look hypocritical over freedom of expression and employing cultural snobs that look down on their roots—there are other worries as well. What we are seeing here is a further transference of the dysfunctions of the still de-colonizing Third World to the American power structure. We've seen other examples of this with US

delegations heading to the Arab world to study, in detail, the modalities of military tribunals, even using Arab interrogators and prisons to "debrief" terror suspects. But now the sordid Arab condition is infecting the media too, America's last line of defense in its public diplomacy war with its enemies, rivals and friends in the Arab and Muslim world. From my own experiences of such "opposition" intellectuals I can add that they are petty dictators in their own field; they cannot handle disagreement and condemn the Arab intelligentsia in the same terms they deride—"traitors," "conspirators," and "backwardists." In point of fact, one of the frequent criticisms leveled at Al-Hurra, and Harb, was that it "looks like the Middle Eastern states we want to change: It's run by a small dictator who is totally corrupt." Harb, while the "news director," determined everything from recruitment to salaries to the priority and content of programs and the choice of guests to subcontracting, all by himself on his personal whims.[9] As a result the staff hired was way below par compared to the Arab competition, Al-Jazeera and Al- Arabia, with unofficial blacklists barring certain guests and implicit understandings with certain Arab regimes, with a misappropriation running into the millions of dollars. And so Harb was removed and replaced with an American. Nonetheless, it is prudent to point out that Harb made all these grievous moral and professional errors because he was "allowed" to by the very people who hired him. As one (Arab) critic put it: "There is no oversight… This guy [Harb] hires and fires and sets salaries on his own, and he'll continue to do it as long as he feels protected by Norman Pattiz and Kenneth Tomlinson."[10] (Tomlinson is the chairman of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the panel created by Congress to oversee Al-Hurra, while Pattiz heads the Middle East committee of the board.) Apart from such congressional backing, Republican and Democrat, Harb got the job thanks to support from the White House Office of Global Communications. We'll have to wait and see if Larry Register's American media ethos can counteract these remaining "American" causes for the channel's downfall.

The Global Dismemberment of American Soft Power

CONTRARY TO COMMON BELIEF, the trials and tribulations of the Bush administration's involvement with the instrumentalities of soft power—the usage of ideas, information and images to promote interests—does not begin with the fiasco over the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI).[11] The exposé, as probably intended, was met with outrage from the media amid concerns over freedom of the press, given that these false stories could easily make their way back into the domestic media thanks to the global information village. The story really begins with one of the few people to emerge from the OSI controversy unscathed, namely, John Walter Rendon Jr., head of The Rendon Group (TRG), a Washington-based public relations and international consulting firm. Rendon had originally been brought in to provide advice on how best to run the OSI, though he denies this. With its premature death he was given the task of finding substitutes, establishing the Coalition Information Center (CIC) in October 2001 to monitor Muslim opinion, replying to terrorist accusations and convincing Muslims that the war on terrorism isn't a war against Islam. Even the successor organizations to the OSI, the White House's Office of Global Communications and the Pentagon's secretive Information Operations Task Force, employ his services. Rendon does not deny working with the IOTF, and reports to the J-3 (head of operations at the Joint Chiefs of Staff) through the IOTF. The Rendon Group, moreover, is authorized to "research and analyze information classified up to Top Secret/SCI/SI/TK/G/HCS," which covers everything from communications intercepts, to reconnaissance aircraft and spy satellite imagery, to human intelligence.[12] Its specific task following the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan was to spread the administration's message on the Iraq War, something that included getting hold of Iraqi defectors for the CIA and publicizing their revelations. This may sound amazing, a private contractor being hired to debrief spies and handle intelligence analysis—and Rendon charges the CIA and the Pentagon $311.26 an hour for this. But Rendon is at the proverbial tip of the iceberg of Washington private contractors who have been actively gobbling up the jobs originally designated for the CIA. That is, everyone from clandestine operations regional desk officers, crisis center watch officers, analysts and

counterintelligence officers. About half of the CIA's work is now carried out by such "spies-for-hire," with Congress being none the wiser.[13] Rendon, then, represents the contemporary trend in post-9/11 America's management of its soft power agenda; a trend that has its roots in the decade that preceded the current presidency.* Instead of (re-)building the infrastructure of public diplomacy in-house within the federal bureaucracy following the Cold Warless world of the 1990s, the government has continued to go out-house and subcontract its efforts to leading lights in the private sector.[14] If anything, it was Rendon who helped start this trend to begin with, as he was brought into the mechanics of the implementation of US foreign policy by the CIA itself under Bush Sr. in 1989. They hired him to get rid of Manuel Noriega's stranglehold on Panama, apparently because they had been given the job by the White House but didn't want to risk any of their own people. As Rendon himself brags, since then his company has "worked in ninety-one countries… involved in every war, with the exception of Somalia."[15] Iraq, moreover, for a long time has been Rendon's exclusive preserve, a test case of just how ineffective his organization, the people his organization employs, and the people who employ him all are. According to Thomas Twetten, the CIA's former deputy of operations, the Iraqi National Congress (INC) was for all intents and purposes Rendon's creation. He even gave the organization its title. "The INC was clueless," says Twetten. "They needed a lot of help and didn't know where to start. That is why Rendon was brought in."[16] Of course, we all know how reliable the "intelligence" the INC provided was; suffice it to say that the CIA pulled the plug in 1996. It had to turn to the Pentagon to stay financially afloat and the INC's track record has not improved much since, ranging from the information they provided on Saddam's supposedly still operational WMD program or his even more supposed connection to 9/11. But on a more strictly soft power understanding, Rendon's work on behalf of liberating Iraq through information was a disaster. Apart from setting up the INC he also established the opposition Iraqi Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) and Radio Hurriah (Freedom) with the CIA.[17] According to a CIA source the broadcasts "sucked. The Iraqis never listened to it. It was like broadcasting Rush Limbaugh into Iraq, in English. Nobody knew what the fuck it was. The only people that we found out listened to it were the Israelis." What Rendon did was hire "this Potemkin village to write scripts for the radio, in Kuwait… [managed] by these kids, that had all been in Latin America" who knew little or nothing about Iraq. One ex-CIA official described the whole operation as a "$150 million rip-off," and one the CIA was actively involved in.[18] The long record of government-Rendon cooperation, then, has been abysmal, and yet it persists. Much the same holds for Al-Hurra, with broadcasters from Beirut and Dubai getting paid substantial sums of money despite the fact that they hardly ever showed up for work while someone else was reportedly paid $80,000 a year for a weekly ten minute talk. From a theoretical perspective what this all means is that, paradoxically, in the age of globalization (the hollowing out of the state) the proactive role of the state in managing global information flows has been reaffirmed. The "state-centrism" of realism, in other words, has been reaffirmed. At least in principle. Leaving it to the private sector simply won't do. They are too steeped in the every-man-for-himself market culture of Adam Smith. Examples of this abound, from CNN's function as Saddam's mouthpiece during the first Gulf War to the role that American networks played in confounding the US presence in Somalia (under Clinton). Moreover, the classic case of this in American media history is the fact that if it were not for the Federal Communication Commission's "stipulations about 'social responsibility' and the necessity for a minimum level" of international new coverage "it is possible that for financial reasons" such coverage "would disappear from general broadcasting and become the province of specialized news channels such as CNN on cable television."[19] Media corporations, like all businesses, are primarily interested in the profitability—and not the cultural-ideological content—of what they broadcast. As a consequence, the economic phenomenon of "market failure" takes on political significance, creating problems for the very spread of capitalism and the liberal model of democracy it is supposed to promote. According to Claude Moisy, former chairman and general manager of Agence France-Presse, throughout the 1990s — following the first Gulf War—CNN itself was "struggling to make live global coverage its trademark."[20] How can the U.S. provide world news, with a distinctly pro-American slant, to the world if it cannot even (afford to) provide it to its own

domestic audience? As Marxists and Keynesians have long observed, capitalism needs to be protected from itself. Al-Hurra was supposed to remedy this market failure by creating an American media outlet both focused on a foreign audience—Arabs and Muslims—and subsidized by the American taxpayer ($200 million so far with another $80 million for the next fiscal year).[21] It was supposed to but instead fell into the same political economic trap, and hasn't been able to get itself out of this fix even now that Muwafaq Harb is gone. While Harb was in charge quiet a lot of deference was paid to Arab sensibilities, popular and official, when it came to matters ranging from describing Hamas and Hezbullah as "terrorist" organizations to Saddam's execution and coverage of the Egyptian presidential elections. Even under Larry Register complaints have already abounded in the US over Al-Hurra's growing pro-Arabic, pro- Islamic tilt.[22]

Where not to go from here?

NOT THAT THE PUBLIC SECTOR is all it's cracked up to be in the U.S., to be honest, even in the heyday of the Cold War. Institutions in the US, public and private, have a penchant for over-scientizing matters of politics, making up for cultural ignorance of various world hotspots through a fetish for abstract models:[23] Bob McNamara's excessive usage of flowchart diagrams during the Vietnam War and the RAND Corporation usage of oligopolistic models (game theory) to plot Soviet responses. The neo-conservatives are an extension of this tradition in the contemporary context, given that Paul Wolfowitz was originally slotted to become a chemist before falling in love with political science, to the dismay of his father—a distinguished math professor at Cornell—who considered political science tantamount to "astrology"![24] That would explain their "rational" expectation that the Iraqis would greet the invading armies with flowers and open arms. Cherry-picking educational curricula and religious scripture for "immoderate" injunctions will only make matters worse—yet more foreign intervention into our very holiest of holies, scripture and the teaching of scripture. And "enlightened" teaching of scripture will automatically be tainted in the minds of the hyperactive Muslim youth by the source of funding and instructions for such teaching. Not to forget the top-down, elitist form of education this will entail. (Such an attitude pervades the rabid condemnations of extremism on Saudi TV during the Friday prayer sermon, furnishing us with a religious example of what Muwafaq Harb has been getting up to). The best way the Americans can help Arabs get out of this fix is to put their own house in order and, in the process, kill off the sources for cash and political support for Arab collaborators, and the cultural elitism this perpetuates.[25] This will have a rebounding effect by isolating key decision-centers in the US from the cultural diseases the Arabs suffer from. In the long run the American nation-state has to reassert itself, whether in the form of reversing the tide of globalization or reemploying more classical realists and area studies specialists. John Rendon and Paul Wolfowitz—private sector, public sector—are two sides of the same post-9/11 US coin that is costing both the American dismembered nation-state and the Arab/Muslim world far too dearly.

Footnotes

* Even when it comes to old-fashioned coercive hard power, companies from Blackwater to Halliburton are increasingly taking over the army's job; whether building bases or using phosphorous weapons. And now Halliburton doesn't even pay taxes to the US government, shifting to Dubai of all places! Special thanks to Nancy Snow, Helen Rizzo and Nicholas Hopkins.

1. Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Challenge of Soft Power," *Time*, March 8, 1999.
2. Joshua Muravchik, "Hearts, Minds, and the War Against Terror," *Commentary*, 113(5), May 2002, p. 28.
3. For an account of the push and pull over post-Cold War US soft power and the debate over

cultural-informational globalization, please see: Emad El-Din Aysha, "The Limits and Contradictions of 'Americanization," *Socialist Register 2004*, ed. Leo Panitch & Colin Leys (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), pp. 247-262.

4. Please see Al-Ittijah al-Muakis, (The Opposite Direction). The quotes are my translation.
5. Quoted in Jim Rutenberg, "The Struggle For Iraq: Hearts And Minds; Coming Soon to Arab TV's: U.S. Answer to Al Jazeera, Production Values and All," *New York Times*, December 17, 2003.
6. Please see Magdi Khalil,"Why Did Alhurra Fail?," April 19, 2006, *Middle East Transparent*.
7. Nicholas Hopkins, "The Debate about Development in India and Egypt," lecture presented at the American University in Cairo, December 7, 2005.
8. Khalil, "Why Did Alhurra Fail?"
9. Mamoun Fandy, senior fellow in Middle East policy at Rice University's Baker Institute, quoted in Khalil, "Why Did Alhurra Fail?"; my italics.
10. Hishem Melham, Washington bureau chief of the Lebanese daily newspaper *Al-Safir*, quoted in Khalil, "Why Did Alhurra Fail?".
11. James Dao and Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Readies Efforts to Sway Sentiment Abroad," *New York Times*, 19 February 2002.
12. James Bamford, "The Man Who Sold the War: Meet John Rendon, Bush's general in the propaganda war," *Rolling Stone*, 17 November 2005.
13. Bamford cites a senior administration official involved in intelligence-budget decisions.
14. See my article on this topic, "September 11 and the Middle East Failure of US 'Soft Power,'" *International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2005), pp. 193–210. For a more empirical and exhaustive account of the state of public diplomacy and propaganda before and after September 11th, see Nancy Snow's *Propaganda, Inc.: Selling America's Culture to the World* (Seven Stories Press, 2002) and *Information War: American Propaganda, Free Speech and Opinion Control Since 9/11* (Seven Stories Press, 2003).
15. Rendon, quoted in Bamford.
16. Twetten, quoted in Bamford.
17. Laura Miller and Sheldon Rampton, "The Pentagon's Information Warrior: Rendon to the Rescue," *PR Watch*, vol. 8, no. 4, 4th Quarter 2001.
18. Most of the money went to American "consultants" in London and the Middle East who made small fortunes that were used later to buy big houses in Washington neighborhoods or rent fancy offices for work unrelated to Iraq. Many in the CIA were in on the game themselves: "At the end of the year we—the CIA's Iraq Group — had money left over, so we got instructions from the DO [the CIA's Directorate of Operations]: 'Well, go and spend it.' So we went out and bought brand new Jeep Cherokees… All the cars we had in the Middle East for the Iraqi program were going to the wives of the COS's [the chiefs of station]…. It was a $150 million rip-off. Go up to northwest [Washington, D.C.] and look at those big houses, and you'll know how they got paid for." (Anonymous source quoted by Jeff Stein, "When Things Turn Weird, The Weird Turn Pro: Propaganda, The Pentagon And The Rendon Group," TOMPAINE.com, February 26, 2002.
19. Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi "Global News Media Cover the World", in *Questioning the Media: A Critical Introduction,* ed. John Downing, Ali Mohammadi, and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995), 2nd edition, p. 435.
20. Claude Moisy, "Myths of the Global Information Village," *Foreign Policy*, No. 107, Summer 1997, p. 81.
21. Figures taken from Khalil, Why Did Alhurra Fail?"
22. Please see Joel Mowbray, "Al-Hurra, US Funded Cable Network in Mid-East, Becomes 'Platform for Terrorists,'" posted by Lynn Davidson on March 22, 2007, Lynn Davidson's blog.
23. There is, in fact, a long history of realist critiques of US foreign policy, and foreign policy thinking, from both sides of the Atlantic. For instance, Hedley Bull's classic article,

"International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach," *World Politics*, 18 (3), April 1966, pp. 361-377, and Hans Morgenthau's very aptly titled, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1946). This debate over the scientific validity of foreign policy theory has been revived in realist circles since the Iraq War. See John J. Mearsheimer, "Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq war: realism versus neo-conservatism," May 19, 2005, and Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Beyond the Realist Theories: 'Neo-conservative Realism' and the American Invasion of Iraq," preliminary draft of a paper presented at the 2005 Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) annual conference held in London, Ontario, June 2-4.

24. Bill Keller, "The Sunshine Warrior," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2002. Also see Hedley Bull's "International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach,", and Morgenthau's *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*.
25. This doesn't just apply to people like Harb, who just broadcast propaganda, but those who make up the propaganda and "intelligence" itself. For instance, the INC's now defunct chieftain Ahmad Chalabi. When queried about the stories his INC concocted for the US media, he had the audacity to say: "As far as we're concerned, we've been entirely successful. That tyrant Saddam is gone, and the Americans are in Baghdad. What was said before is not important. The Bush administration is looking for a scapegoat. We're ready to fall on our swords if he wants. We are heroes in error." (Quoted in Jack Fairweather, "Heroes in Error," *Mother Jones*.)