

## SHARQ AL-ADNA/THE VOICE OF BRITAIN

The UK's 'Secret' Arabic Radio Station and Suez War Propaganda Disaster

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**Abstract** / This study of Sharq al-Adna – The Near East Broadcasting Station – attempts to review the history of the British government-operated radio station in light of political and military developments in the Middle East involving the UK after the end of the League of Nations/United Nations Palestine Mandate. An examination of Sharq al-Adna is important because it helps document both British and more widely western concerns about the Middle East in the 1950s, especially after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in July 1956 after the June British departure. The article discusses western, and more specifically British, propaganda during the Second World War, and analyzes this station's history with the aid of government documents that were declassified in the mid-1990s and to which the writer had access.

**Keywords** / Arab radio / Arab world / British Radio / propaganda / Suez radio

Radio stations operated by governments, political opposition groups and the military attempting to obfuscate their true identity are not unusual; in fact, they were almost common until the end of the Cold War. Such operations that tried to hide their identity, location and true purpose were pervasive during the Second World War, especially in Europe. Defining these stations is quite difficult because by their very nature they are all very different and were created for strategic purposes, primarily political and military. The expression 'clandestine radio' comes to mind, but in the case of this study, it does not really apply.

According to Browne (1982: 62) clandestine stations are those that 'either did not announce their identity or location, or pretended to be broadcasting from within an "enemy" nation'. During the Second World War, the British were very active in this type of broadcasting with transmission sites such as Aspidistra, a powerful British-operated, US-made medium-wave facility that broadcast from England to Europe and North Africa using several identities (Soley, 1989; Wood, 1992). The Cold War saw the creation of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberation (later changed to Radio Liberty), two stations created by and operating under the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) budget until publicly exposed in the early 1970s (Critchlow, 1995; Mickelson, 1983). For whatever reasons, some governments have been involved in clandestine radio because of the belief that it is, or was, an important instrument of foreign or military policy.

This study of Sharq al-Adna – The Near East Broadcasting Station –

reviews the history of the British-operated station, especially in light of political and military developments in the Middle East involving the UK after the end of the League of Nations/UN Palestine Mandate. This study is important because it helps document not only British, but also more widely western, concerns about the Middle East in the 1950s, especially after the Egyptian Revolution that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power.

## **Middle East Broadcasting Background**

The Middle East has been an interesting area for transborder radio broadcasters and listeners alike since the early 1930s, when Mussolini started broadcasting from Radio Bari (named after its transmitter location in southeastern Italy) to the Middle East in Arabic. The specific motivation for this service is unclear because there were so few radio receivers in the Middle East at the time. Receiver owners needed household electricity, then sporadically available only in urban areas. In the 1920s and early 1930s, there were a few low-power, privately owned stations in British-influenced Egypt, but the Italian Arabic-language programs had a monopoly on programming from outside the Arab world. Looking ahead to future military ventures in North Africa and Ethiopia, Mussolini's Arabic broadcasts were increasingly anti-British after 1935. This caused some concern on the part of British diplomats in Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan and the Arabian Gulf sheikhdoms then known as the Trucial States. The British Foreign and Dominions Office was alerted to the possible impact of such broadcasts, but feedback from diplomatic cables and memoranda concluded at the time that the programs were not very effective in swaying public opinion (Diplomatic Correspondence, n.d.).

Despite the initial unconcerned British reaction to the Bari broadcasts, reports circulated that Italy's often strident, anti-British programs found a receptive audience and were effective in promoting Italian interests. Some of these reports came from Arabists who understood the importance in this predominantly oral culture of the potential impact of Arabic cleverly presented to a largely illiterate audience. Further, some of the more well-informed westerners residing in the Arab world knew about the male custom of frequenting coffee houses in the evening, drinking coffee and tea, and discussing politics. Some coffee house owners were adding radio receivers to attract and keep customers.

By 1936, the British government realized the potential danger of international armed conflict, particularly in Europe. At the time, the BBC, by that time well entrenched in British society and a model for much of the world, had a monopoly on broadcasting within the UK. Its external transmissions, known then as the Empire Service, started in 1932 as an extension of the domestic service that was transmitted only in English and was primarily intended for British citizens abroad. But the UK was studying the possibility of starting foreign-language broadcasts. In 1936, the British Foreign and Dominions Office asked diplomats around the world their reaction to BBC foreign-language broadcasts. Missions in the Middle East were unanimous in recommending that an Arabic service be added (Mansell, 1982). On 3 January 1938, the Empire

Service officially started transmitting in Arabic, its first foreign language ('Arabic Broadcasts', 1938). This event marked the beginning of the first international radio war among western countries over a developing region.

Once the BBC started its Arabic Service, it determined that it would be of exceptionally high quality; at the time Britain had the resources and determination to achieve the goal. The BBC hired Egyptian announcers and sought to bring to London prominent Arab leaders as well as singers and musicians. Radio Bari's Arabic broadcasts attempted to meet the British radio challenge by increasing the vituperative nature of their political commentary.

Although no evidence has been found by this writer to back the claim, in the mid-1930s Italy reportedly distributed to sympathetic political supporters and friendly coffee house owners free radio receivers that could only receive Bari frequencies. However, by 1938 receivers were becoming more common in urban homes and public coffee houses. The so-called Radio War between Britain and Italy was, in fact, only a brief contest for a few listeners in the Arab world. Lasting only from January to April 1938, airwave hostilities ended officially on 16 April 1938, with the signing of the Anglo-Italian Pact (Grandin, 1939). However, Nazi Germany started transmitting in Arabic for the first time in April 1938 (Bergmeier and Lotz, 1997), just as the Pact came into force. Germany became an Italian radio surrogate and provided a new approach with the addition of anti-Jewish and anti-British themes broadcast by several prominent Arab exiles, including Rashid Ali El-Ghailani, an ex-prime minister of Iraq, and Hajji Amin Al-Husayni, the spiritual leader of the Palestinian Arabs and Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Al-Husayni also served as an advisor to a secret Nazi station, *The Voice of the Free Arabs*, that started on 9 May 1941, broadcasting a 30-minute program to Egypt (Bergmeier and Lotz, 1997).

In 1939, both the USSR and France started Arabic broadcasts. The French, with interests then in North Africa, Lebanon and Syria, had the advantage of either possessing medium-wave facilities there for local programming or influencing domestic schedules, making possible local relays of Paris-based Arabic programming. The British had a similar advantage with domestic programs in Hebrew, Arabic and English via the Palestine Broadcasting Service (PBS) in Jerusalem.

One is unable to assess the impact of the Italian, British, German and Soviet war-years broadcasts to the Arab world. Audience research, except for that done by the major western international radio broadcasters, is still seldom done in the Arab world, and no surveys were done during the 1930s.

During the Second World War, the most active international broadcasters to the Arab world were Germany and the UK. Each country encouraged strong radio personalities to develop. The Nazi Arabic Service employed an Iraqi, Yunus al-Bahri, one of the most gifted Arabic-language broadcasters, to transmit from Europe. However, the BBC also had popular announcers during the war. Isa Sabbagh, a Palestinian who later became an American citizen and worked as a foreign service officer for the United States Information Agency, was a broadcaster with a considerable Arab-world following.

In his early 1950s study, Brunner (1953) mentions the importance of the coffee house as a place for radio listening for males, noting that the coffee house

was ‘a center of considerable importance, comparable to the country store of yesteryear in the United States’ (Brunner, 1953: 150). Surveys indicate that post-Second World War Arab-world radio remained a popular activity. Until the 1990s, when satellite television became a major home entertainment attraction, even in the modern Gulf states radios were heard in hotel lobbies and in shops. Car radios are standard equipment at the beginning of the new millennium, particularly with increasing FM programming.

## **Palestine Broadcasting Station: Sharq al-Adna**

Although the exact beginnings of Britain’s Arabic-language Sharq al-Adna (Near East Arab Broadcasting Station) remain unknown because some important British government records are still not available to the public, Hurewitz (1968) states that the station started broadcasting from Jaffa, Palestine, in 1942; Thomas (1966) maintains it started in 1941. Its transmitters and studios were most likely built by the British military and Allied intelligence community during the Second World War as part of a Palestine-based Allied Forces/anti-Axis powers regional information effort that was not restricted to radio. At the time, the British tried to influence both broadcast and print information in an effort to entice Arabs to join British and British-backed military forces, as well as to utilize the media to maintain political and economic stability in Palestine, its League of Nations Mandated area. The British and Americans were also looking beyond the end of the war to the Arabian Gulf states, where oil had been discovered in the early 1930s. Another especially thorny problem for both the British and anti-Nazi Arabs was a major German propaganda asset: Palestine’s leading (and pro-Nazi) Muslim religious authority had fled to Germany, where he remained – while doing some broadcasts in Arabic – throughout the Second World War.

Soley (1989) noted the connection between the Second World War British propaganda operation SO2 (which had radio operations in Palestine) and SO2’s successor, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) (which sponsored both propaganda and armed resistance operations during the war). Throughout the Second World War, Palestine was an ideal, secure location for Allied radio transmissions to the Middle East, parts of Asia and southern Europe.

After the Second World War, the UK had little time to celebrate the Allied victory over Nazi Germany; the war effort had devastated the British economy. Also, many in British government service realized that those countries over which it exerted political and economic influence in the Middle East and Africa were going to be successful in seeking independence. Britain understood that even if it wished to maintain such influence, it did not have the financial resources to do so. Finally, the UK, still administrating Palestine under a UN Mandate, knew that Arab and Jewish confrontation there necessitated withdrawal.

Just prior to the British departure from Palestine in May 1948, Sharq al-Adna was moved to then British-controlled Cyprus. At first, the station transmitted its commercial Arabic programs from four short-wave transmitters near Limassol. But by 1955 broadcasts were available from a 100-kilowatt

medium-wave transmitter on 635 kHz (*World Radio Handbook*, 1957: 88). It was during the 1950s that international broadcasters – both among Arab countries and western radio programmers such as the BBC – started to understand one of the almost unique radio characteristics of Arab-world radio: a great deal of non-domestic radio listening would be done on medium-wave, i.e. the standard AM band. BBC funding for international broadcasts comes from the government, not domestic license fee payers, and the Foreign Office started talking about BBC medium-wave relays from Cyprus that apparently could serve several purposes. Attached to a letter classified ‘Secret’ from C.C.B. Stewart of the Foreign Office’s Information Policy Department dated 28 September 1956 (Stewart, 1956), regarding funding for a BBC relay station in Cyprus, is a multi-page document titled, ‘Establishment of a [BBC] Relay Station in Cyprus to Serve the Middle East’, dated 11 July 1956. After discussing short-wave broadcasting to the Arab world, the memo says:

*There is, however, another factor of equal importance [to short-wave]. This is the rapid growth within recent years of medium-wave broadcasting in the Middle East. Several high-power stations are already operating on medium wave-lengths, and more are known to be under construction. The transmission from these stations can be received much more easily and clearly than short-wave transmissions from Europe, so that listeners are coming to rely more and more on the medium waves. This trend undoubtedly represents a very serious threat to the BBC’s Arabic Service, which is at present confined entirely to the short waves. (‘Establishment of . . .’, 1956)*

The document goes on to mention the Voice of America broadcasts to the Arab world via medium-wave from the Greek port city of Salonika, and a US ship, the *USS Courier*, anchored in the Mediterranean. It states also that Sharq al-Adna already had a medium-wave facility and that the BBC’s proposed medium-wave transmitter, when ready, should be located at the same site. The British had every reason to be concerned about the impact of medium-wave broadcasting in the Arab world. Very shortly after the Egyptian Revolution in 1952, radio services from Cairo such as the Voice of the Arabs could be heard throughout the Arab world on medium-wave frequencies (Boyd, 1975). Britain was not alone in anticipating that Nasser might nationalize the Suez Canal after Britain’s June 1956 departure from that area.

Immediately after the British left Palestine, Sharq al-Adna was criticized by the various Jewish political factions as being obviously pro-Arab, specifically pro-King Abdullah of Transjordan. BBC files contain an interesting memorandum from E. Marmorstein to the Middle East representative of an unidentified British government entity, referencing the representative’s memorandum of 28 September 1948, following a trip to Cyprus in which he notes Sharq al-Adna’s ‘attempt to disguise its identity’ (Marmorstein, 1948). The memo goes on to forward a Parliamentary Question on ‘the subject’ that took place on 16 June 1948:

*Mr. Piratin asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs whether he is aware that the Radio Station in Cyprus, run by the Foreign Office Information Department, has been encouraging the Arabs in their invasion of Palestine; that on May 28th it called on Arabs to occupy Haifa; and whether he will make a statement.*

*Mr. Bevin: I have seen a monitoring report of a broadcast by the Near East Arabic Broadcasting Station on possible Arab military activity. This station is not run by the Foreign Office Information Department . . .*

*Wing-Commander Hulberts: Who operates this station?*

*Mr. Bevin: It is operated by a group of people connected with the Arabs.*

*Mr. Pickthorn: Can the Foreign Secretary tell us by whom it is licensed and what is the juridical nature of this body?*

*Mr. Bevin: It operated in Palestine, and for technical reasons it was removed by Cyprus. The people who have been operating [it] are the same people who operated it for years in Palestine. (Marmorstein, 1948)*

Following the initial UN-sponsored armistice agreement establishing the boundaries of the State of Israel, the station seems to have turned its attention to building a sufficiently large audience to attract advertisers by using popular programming. In some respects, Sharq al-Adna was an early version of Radio Monte Carlo Middle East (RMCME), the popular music and news-oriented French government-owned medium-wave station transmitting from Cyprus that had attracted large audiences during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s before direct satellite television took away some radio listeners. News and music were staples of Sharq al-Adna's commercial broadcasts, reaching an audience where then virtually all Arab-world stations were government operated and thus little more than non-commercial propaganda stations. Sharq al-Adna had a Cyprus-based staff of approximately 70, in addition to those at a production facility in Beirut, and a large number of news correspondents throughout the Arab world. It also had a policy of hiring as many Christian Arab staff as possible, thinking, incorrectly as it turned out, that they would remain loyal to their British masters in the event that the true nature of the station became known (Jawad Zada, Director of Foreign Programs, Radio Jordan, personal interview, Amman, Jordan, 16 November 2000). A schedule from 28 June 1948, for example, notes transmissions starting at 10:00 a.m. local time and continuing until 9:15 p.m. News, a review of the world's press, or a 'Talk' or 'Feature' were available almost hourly (Sharq al-Adna schedule, 1948). By 1950, the format was almost identical, but programming started earlier, at 5:55 a.m. (Sharq al-Adna schedule, 1950). A very similar schedule, with the occasional sign-off as early as 8:30 p.m., existed in 1952, 1954 and 1956 (Sharq al-Adna schedule, 1952, 1954, 1956). The end of programming, relatively early in the evening for listeners who tend to stay up later than those in the West, is interesting, particularly when audience size likely increased dramatically in the early 1950s after sunset with the addition of a medium-wave transmitter on 635 kHz. This was, of course, before television started in the area, when western and Arab-world radio broadcasters made schedule adjustments because of audience shifts to popular television programs in the evening.

The British government's association with the station was no secret to many listeners, and Hale in his book *Radio Power* notes that the Lebanese referred to the station as the 'Cavalry of St. George', after a British coin then in circulation

that featured the patron saint's image (Hale, 1975: 121). Barbara Castle, a prominent British politician in the 1950s, wrote that at first the station was rather independent of the British government, but it 'kept in touch with the Foreign Office and had helped to "sell" British policy, as well as British exports, in Arab countries – all the more successfully because it was not tied to official directives' (Castle, 1956: 832).

Various sources consulted for this study note that the BBC was completely aware of Sharq al-Adna's British-government funding and in the late 1940s was hesitant to become involved with personnel exchanges or joint transmitter projects because of the possibility that the BBC's reputation for fair, independent news reporting and commentary could be tarnished. Nonetheless, some within the BBC saw a benefit in some cooperation in light of lean financial times for post-Second World War external broadcasting. In a letter dated 28 March 1951, E.C. Last of the Foreign Office writing to J. B. Clark, Director of BBC Overseas Services, asks for assistance in recruiting a director and deputy director for Sharq al-Adna. Mr Last also comments with some humor, seemingly almost unique in official Foreign Office correspondence, on the future of the station: 'I can at present say no more than that it will certainly continue for another two years . . . but as to that you will appreciate that the decision is in the lap of the gods – or should I say their representatives here in London!' (Last, 1951). Indeed, the station did last for many more years, and the BBC external service, it seems, was keen for cooperation from the government body that helped determine its level of funding. In a letter classified as 'secret' from C.F.A. Warner of the Foreign Office to General Sir Ian Jacob at the BBC's Broadcasting House headquarters, the government notes BBC interest in cooperation:

*You will remember telling me last month that you had been thinking about the possibility of co-operation between the B.B.C. and Sharq-el-Adna. We have been considering this, and we agree that the two stations could usefully co-operate in the way which you suggested, by discussing relays and exchanges of material, as might be done by any friendly independent broadcasting companies. (Warner, 1951)*

By 1951, the BBC had been broadcasting to the Arab world in Arabic for 13 years, during which time it achieved a reputation for objective news and current affairs programming. At least in retrospect, it seems odd that the BBC would have taken steps both to compromise its own credibility during a time of conflict and to hasten competition for an audience that increasingly had more programming choices from which to select. Apparently, some appeasement of its Foreign Office friends and the prospect of gaining needed new and more powerful transmitters on Cyprus were primary motivations.

Sensing some kind of potential conflict in the area, the Foreign Office stepped up work at Sharq al-Adna, anticipating that it might play a valuable role in promoting British government interests in the area. Putting into place a 100,000-watt medium-wave transmitter (very powerful at the time) in 1955 was a proof that the British government was serious about delivering a signal that was easily heard in much of the Middle East. John Whitehead, the BBC's Cyprus-based Arabic Programme Organizer, wrote to London on 12 May 1955, passing along an article that had appeared in the daily *Egyptian Gazette*

English newspaper noting that Sharq al-Adna had started transmitting via a new 100,000-watt facility on 9 May 1955. After noting that the only such equally powerful transmitter was situated in Cairo, the article notes that it is the only commercial station in the area, and ‘was founded fourteen years ago by the British Government’s intelligence services and after the war was handed over to commercial enterprise with the aim of furthering the cause of anti-Communism and British interests in the Arab world’ (Whitehead, 1955).

In the midst of a rapidly changing political, military and economic situation in the Middle East – some of which was inspired by Gamal Nasser’s Arab Socialist movement – the British military left the Suez Canal Zone in June 1956. Egyptian President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal the following month, thereby inviting some type of military confrontation with the West, especially Britain. What was to be the Suez embarrassment for Britain under then Prime Minister Anthony Eden actually started with then Jordanian King Hussein’s dismissal of British General John Glubb as commander of the Arab Legion (Jordan’s army) on 1 March 1956 (Nutting, 1967). Radio broadcasts from Egypt seem to have played a part in fanning Arab resentment over the West and thus what eventually became the Suez crisis. Eden, according to his Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anthony Nutting, personally believed Glubb’s firing was instigated by Egypt’s President Nasser. Nutting, who resigned from his post and from parliament over Eden’s handling of the Suez crisis, says that Britain tried to ‘tighten its grip upon those countries where its writ still ran’, after Egypt’s Voice of the Arabs radio station encouraged ‘fellow Arabs to arise and rid themselves of alien occupation and of those rulers who were collaborating with the “Western Imperialists”’ (Nutting, 1967: 10).

On 30 October 1956, Israel – with British and French knowledge and support – attacked Sinai. The Suez War was underway. At 11:30 a.m. that morning, C.C.B. Stewart of the British Foreign Office called J.B. Clark, Director of BBC External Broadcasting, informing him that he was going to announce ‘the requisitioning of Sharq-al-Adna at 3 p.m. today’ (Clark, 1956), a seemingly curious move because the British government actually owned the station, but needed some kind of internal official document in order to seek BBC assistance to keep it operating.

In the early hours of the war it became obvious that this station was very British. In fact, it was revealed that it was under the control of either British intelligence, the military, or both. Renamed the Voice of Britain, it started broadcasting anti-Nasser news and messages asking civilians to keep clear of military targets (Alan, 1957).

As the British, French and Israeli armed forces attacked Egypt, the country’s Ministry of Information used its powerful Voice of the Arabs medium-wave and short-wave radio transmitters to counter broadcasts from Sharq al-Adna/The Voice of Britain. On 1 November, the British Air Force bombed Egyptian radio transmitters near Cairo, with the aim of eliminating competition for the Voice of Britain. However, bombing tactics failed because only antennae and towers were knocked down, and damage to transmission equipment itself was not extensive. Engineers soon had other backup, but not as powerful, transmitters on the air (El-Garhi El-Kashlan, Chairman, Broadcast Engineering



Section, Egyptian Radio-TV Union, personal interview, Cairo, Egypt, 10 August 1974). According to M. Abdel-Kader Hatem, who was in charge of Egypt's information effort during the Suez War, Voice of the Arabs broadcasts reminded listeners that the 'Near East Broadcasting Station . . . was in reality run by the British intelligence service' (Hatem, 1974: 184). The Egyptians did something else that must have attracted the attention of Egyptian and other Arab Sharq al-Adna announcers: 'while making it clear that active co-operation with those broadcasts was nothing short of treason, the Egyptian government wisely left the door open for the rehabilitation of announcers and others who genuinely regretted their unpatriotic acts'; later, several former Egyptian announcers at the Voice of Britain returned to Egypt and worked at Radio Cairo (Hatem, 1974: 184). The Egyptians knew the identities of virtually all the Sharq al-Adna staff because members of the anti-British EOKA rebels (National Organization of Cypriote Struggle) were financially supported by Egypt and at the request of Egyptian Intelligence had returned the assistance in several ways, including taking photographs inside the Sharq al-Adna studios. 'These photographs showed both the inside of the studios and announcers' faces, so we knew who they were' (Heikal, 1971: 86).

As the Suez War started, it became clear to the British government that they were not really ready to utilize the Voice of Britain as a propaganda vehicle in an attempt to make Arab listeners anti-Nasser and pro-West, or at least pro-British. For one thing, virtually all of the Arab announcing and production staff (many of whom were Palestinians and Egyptians), as well as Ralph Poston, the British Sharq al-Adna director, quit or were fired – after announcing on the air that they were on Egypt's side (Thomas, 1966) – as the new station name was announced. Jawad Zada, a Palestinian who worked at the station from 1953 to 1956, said that Arab BBC announcers arrived to keep the station on the air with the aid of recorded music and other programming (Jawad Zada, English Service, Radio Jordan, personal interview, Amman, Jordan, 5 November 1979). Voice of Britain attacks, reflecting British Prime Minister Eden's view of Nasser, as the enemy, had the dominant theme: 'Britain loves the Egyptian people, but Nasser is an evil man' (Heikal, 1971: 109). Heikal gives an example of the Voice of Britain's badly done anti-Nasser broadcasts:

*The broadcasts displayed a surprising ignorance of Egyptian affairs and thinking. In just one instance, when the propagandists suggested a list of eight names of Egyptians who would be acceptable to the British in a new government, two of the men they named, Hafez Ramadan and Aly Zaki el Oraby, were already dead. The broadcasts served only to increase Nasser's popularity. (Heikal, 1971: 110)*

There was an official on-air announcement of the obvious – that the British government was operating the station with diminished personnel that the BBC could not possibly supplement because of its own greatly expanded Arabic Service programming during the crisis. With almost no prospects that competent Arab announcers from Arab countries would seek employment (for fear of being permanently banned from Arab world on-air radio employment), the station continued to limp along, under the direction of British Brigadier Bernard Fergusson, who had no media experience and was sent to Cyprus on 22 October,

nine days before the British and French air attack on Egypt of 31 October, because he was between assignments (Thomas, 1966). Jawad Zada remembers Fergusson as the opposite of station director Ralph Poston with regard to people skills and knowledge of the Arab world (Jawad Zada, Director of Foreign Programs, Radio Jordan, personal interview, Amman, Jordan, 16 November 2000). The station remained an ineffective propaganda embarrassment until the British found a face-saving way to remove themselves from the situation and hand over the frequencies and powerful transmitters to the BBC, which desperately wanted the high-powered medium-wave transmitting capacity then, and now, so crucial to reaching Middle East listeners, even with the possible taint that the former Voice of Britain short-wave and medium-wave frequencies carried. However, given Britain's experience with clandestine broadcasting to mainland Europe during the Second World War, its actions regarding Sharq al-Adna during the actual Suez fighting period are questionable. Imagine what listeners must have thought hearing both the Voice of Britain and the BBC Arabic Service, broadcasting 10 and five hours per day respectively (Waterfield, 1966), from the Voice of Britain's 100,000-watt medium-wave transmitter from Cyprus. In fact, not only were many Sharq al-Adna and BBC broadcasts contradictory regarding Britain's Suez and Middle East policy during the war, but also it was noted by MP Barbara Castle, that the Voice of Britain had contaminated the BBC, 'the authority of whose broadcasts has always been the most effective safeguard for British prestige' (Castle, 1956: 832).

Jawad Zada, whose brothers also worked at the station, recalls Ralph Poston's final meeting with his staff, joining them in tendering his resignation by saying that he was 'ashamed to be British'. The Arab staff that resigned were paid salaries almost immediately, but had to remain on Cyprus because air traffic to the Arab world was disrupted by the Suez War. Poston, who was also an Anglican priest, remained briefly on Cyprus after resigning and served a small congregation on Cyprus. On 1 January 1957, Zada and four other Arabs were deported to Beirut, Lebanon on a British military aircraft (Jawad Zada, Director of Foreign Programs, Radio Jordan, personal interview, Amman, Jordan, 16 November 2000).

More than broadcasting during Suez went wrong for Britain. The war was lost, when then Prime Minister Anthony Eden failed to gain the support of the US government, as well as some British constituents in a similar manner to how the British press and public had supported the government throughout the Second World War. After a failed attempt to interest British commercial interests to take over the station, the station was given to the BBC at the end of March 1957 (Waterfield, 1966). Noting that the specific date was 31 March 1957, the BBC remained officially reluctant to be very specific about the transmitter's history and location, noting that medium-wave rebroadcasting came 'from a transmitter in the Middle East' (BBC, 1958: 254). Those facilities, especially the 100,000-watt medium-wave transmitter, and the short-wave transmitters the BBC already had on Cyprus, formed the basis for what became the most consistently popular and credible Arabic-language radio services in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s transmitting in Arabic (Boyd, 1999).

## Discussion

The British have had a long and at times unsuccessful diplomatic relationship with the Middle East, specifically the Arabic-speaking world. Historically, the UK has been involved in Aden, the administration of most Trucial (now Gulf) states, Egypt and (via League of Nations and UN Mandates) Jordan, Iraq and Palestine. The UK gradually disengaged from direct political and administrative involvement with Arab-world states, leaving the Gulf and the protectorate of Aden, now part of Yemen, in the late 1960s.

The policy of having a government-owned ‘ sleeper ’ radio station ‘ at the ready ’ for times of crisis until the Suez War in 1956 had many attractions for Britain. Looking at Britain’s radio broadcasting history in the Arab world between the end of the Second World War and March 1957, one sees a failed attempt by several governments, most recently under the leadership of Prime Minister Anthony Eden, to use a radio station to try to help win a futile military operation. Only a headstrong government, directing the Foreign Office, would have ignored both a long tradition of British government expertise in clandestine radio broadcasting during the Second World War and the country’s considerable amount of diplomatic experience in the Arab world to implement what became a failed clandestine station that was an embarrassment to the UK both in the Arab world and at home.

With regard to the station’s switch from Sharq al-Adna to the Voice of Britain, almost everything that could go wrong did. Most Arab diplomats, and presumably some listeners, knew that the operation was much more than a commercial enterprise all along. The Foreign Office kept the BBC informed about the station’s developments, at times asking for technical, administrative and programming assistance. The BBC, whose external radio service is funded by the government via the Foreign Office, wanted to be nominally cooperative, if for no other reason than ultimately to be the benefactor of the Sharq al-Adna medium-wave and short-wave transmitter facility.

The Foreign Office apparently believed that when they actually took over the programming under a new name, the Arab staff would stay and continue to broadcast ‘ British propaganda ’. However, the entire staff and British director resigned when the new name was announced, creating an immediate programming void, except for a few Arabic-speaking BBC announcers who arrived to keep the operation on the air. Ultimately, the Foreign Office lost the wavering support of the BBC when the Voice of Britain and the BBC transmitted often contradictory information to the Arab world because the stations used the same medium-wave frequency.

The programming of Sharq al-Adna, the first Middle East-based station that was not Arab government operated, did ultimately have a positive impact on Arab world radio. Its commercials for products such as pain relievers and washing detergent, along with popular music and credible news, provided a format later copied for the most part by France’s Radio Monte Carlo Middle East, and several Arab government commercial radio services, including Egypt’s The Middle East Program, a station that started in 1964 during Nasser’s presidency.

The Voice of Britain under Brigadier Fergusson's direction probably saved many lives during the British Suez bombing campaign. After bombing temporarily stopped the high-powered transmissions of the Egyptian radio services, the Voice of Britain was the only powerful medium-wave station serving the region. Clearly as a psychological warfare tactic to show the extent of the British air engagement, the station constantly urged listeners to stay away from bridges, airports and military bases.

The Sharq al-Adna/Voice of Britain affair was an embarrassing display of military and diplomatic ineptitude from a country otherwise experienced in radio warfare.

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