

RADIO SAWA: MUSIC AS A TOOL

VOA'S RADIO SAWA USES A MIX OF AMERICAN AND ARAB POPULAR MUSIC, NEWS AND OTHER PROGRAMMING TO GET THE U.S. MESSAGE OUT TO THE ARAB WORLD. BUT HOW IS IT BEING RECEIVED?

By GEORGE GEDDA

It shouldn't be surprising that Norman Pattiz usually walks around with a smile. Pattiz is a millionaire many times over, has a plush estate in Beverly Hills, flies around in his own jet and pals with Sylvester Stallone, Heather Locklear, Jack Nicholson and Shaquille O'Neil.

But he also has a serious side and a penchant for hard work. Entrepreneurial skills helped him found Westwood One, now a \$3.5 billion operation that is America's largest distributor of commercial radio programming. He serves as its chairman.

Lately, though, he has become more identified with a new venture, an attempt to get America's message across to the Arab world through an innovative U.S. government-sponsored radio network that went on the air last March.

For Pattiz, a fortuitous sequence of events led him down this unexpected new career path. Eight years ago, he befriended President Clinton, who appointed him to a seat on the Broadcasting Board of Governors in November 2000. The board presides over all non-military U.S. government broadcast operations overseas.

On assuming his new duties, Pattiz was dismayed at the anemic condition of the Voice of America's Arabic

service. Over 98 percent of those surveyed in the region said they had never listened to VOA — no surprise since it only broadcast seven hours a day of Arabic-language programming in a "one-size-fits-all" approach on short-wave and a very weak medium-wave signal from Rhodes.

Pattiz, putting his radio background to good use, decided a revolutionary approach was needed. A subsequent appointment as chairman of the Board of Governors' Middle East Committee gave him a bureaucratic power base from which to push his ideas. And thanks in large measure to his efforts, VOA's Middle East Radio Network went on the air March 23, 2002, featuring music, news, information and other programming 24 hours a day, every day.

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Music As a Tool

MERN has its headquarters in Washington, with offices in Amman, Cairo and Jerusalem.

Its regional broadcast center, an AM-FM station known as "Radio Sawa" ("Radio Together" in Arabic), is located in Dubai.

Through the use of modern marketing techniques, Sawa seeks to lure the majority younger population of the region with music while also giving them news — balanced reporting that contrasts with the one-sided fare that has dominated the Middle East. The music features American favorites such as Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez and the Back Street Boys — and Arab pop stars from Egypt (Amr Diab), Lebanon (Rashid al-Majid) and other countries.

George Gedda, the State Department correspondent for the Associated Press, is a frequent contributor to the Journal.

"Music is a tool," says Pattiz, 59, who wears a gray buzz cut and a stubble that is far trimmer and less chaotic than Yasser Arafat's. MERN's target audience is 25 and under. "The best way to reach them is with music," he says, adding that in the selection of talent and other programming decisions, nothing is left to guesswork. Through comprehensive research, Pattiz says MERN knows "well before we ever play our first song or broadcast our first feature or news program, who our audience is; what they like to hear; what type of news presentations, features and production values appeal to them."

He adds that the network also takes into account what is already available in the marketplace and what has the best chance of delivering the largest possible target audience to get the message across. "We call this marrying the mission to the market, and it's working," he says. Sawa has already become the No. 1 music station in Amman, the Jordanian capital. More than 40 percent of the 100 young fans of Arab and Western music polled there in Radio Sawa's weekly survey in August said it is the station they listen to most.

An early September survey in Amman showed that 90 percent of young listeners had tuned in to Sawa during the previous week. The number who said Sawa was the radio station they went to most for news had grown from 1 percent in July to 22 percent. Meanwhile, listenership for the BBC has been falling, the survey noted.

At the outset, the network was heard only in a handful of countries but its reach is growing. It is scheduled to be fully operational by late 2002. It has the avowed aim of getting the ear of Arabs in more than a dozen countries stretching from Morocco to Oman

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— containing a potential audience of 300 million listeners under the age of 30.

Getting Out America's Message

Pattiz began laying the groundwork for MERN at a time when the U.S. government was becoming increasingly concerned about an erosion of America's standing in the Arab world. Those concerns accelerated markedly in 2001 as growing violence between Israel and the Palestinians alienated many Arabs who felt that Israeli policies were only possible because of American backing.

The stakes for the United States rose further after the events of Sept. 11, 2001. All Muslim countries except Iraq condemned the attacks, but on the "Arab street" there were strong indications of support for terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida and Taliban partners. When the administration went to war last October in Afghanistan, many Muslims expressed doubts about whether the United States was targeting the real perpetrators of the attacks. "Where's the evidence?" was a familiar refrain, at least

among those who didn't find the televised admissions of bin Laden to be convincing.

Any doubts about congressional funding for MERN evaporated after Sept. 11. It helped that an early backer was Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden, D-Del., a Pattiz friend. Congress approved \$35 million for FY 2002, of which more than \$16 million was earmarked for transmitters. The administration has requested \$21.7 million for 2003. As of late September, the VOA was expecting the full amount to be appropriated.

During congressional testimony in June, Pattiz said there was a "media war" going on in the Middle East. "The weapons of that war include disinformation, incitement to violence, hate radio, government censorship and journalistic self-censorship. The opinions that the Arab street has of the United States of America come out of that environment. We haven't had a horse in this race. But we do now."

Newton Minow, a former Federal Communications Commission chairman, noted in a recent *USA Today* column that much of the Arab world learns about the United States from one source: Al-Jazeera, the Qatar-based, 24-hour news network. Though it has operated since 1996, it only gained widespread U.S. attention following the Sept. 11 attacks when it broadcast interviews by bin Laden and other al-Qaida figures.

Meanwhile, other key players in the Middle East are intensifying their efforts to disseminate their viewpoints beyond their own borders. The *Washington Post* reported in July that the Arab League is spending \$22 million to produce English and Hebrew programming. Egypt is broadcasting two hours of Hebrew television each day via its

Nilesat satellite. Iran is providing its slant on the news through broadcasts to Jewish listeners throughout the Middle East, and particularly in Israel.

Syria and the Shiite fundamentalist organization Hezbollah do the same. And in June, Israel struck back with an Arab-language satellite station that Israeli official Raanan Cohen said would be a “counterbalance to the sea of venomous propaganda surrounding us.”

MERN Hits the Airwaves

Radio Sawa went on the air five months after the bombs started dropping on Afghanistan, with a mission, in Pattiz’s words, “to promote freedom and democracy through the dissemination of accurate, reliable and credible news and information about America and the world to audiences overseas.” When Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to the Middle East just weeks after Sawa aired its first program in March, listeners could hear his words moments after he uttered them. But no one doubts it that will take more than soundbites from top American officials on Radio Sawa to have an impact on Middle East sentiment.

As of late summer, the station was broadcasting in FM from Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and two locations in the United Arab Emirates: Adu Dhabi and Dubai. Palestinians can hear the feed from Jordan. The U.S. government has signed agreements for FM frequencies in Bahrain, and is negotiating similar agreements with other countries. AM signals are being transmitted from the Greek island of Rhodes and Kuwait, whose broadcasts serve Iraq. The Iraq service is tailored for Iraqi listeners. A daily press roundup

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includes news about Iraq gleaned from the Western press.

By the time Sawa is fully operational, it will have six separate “streams,” to use the Sawa vernac-

ular — all crafted for specific countries, each using broadcasters whose dialect and accent are familiar to local audiences. The six will target Iraq, Jordan and the West Bank, Egypt, Sudan, the Gulf States and North Africa. A 600-watt AM transmitter under construction on Cyprus became operational in late summer. It is targeted at Egypt, but is heard in Lebanon and other nearby countries. A similar transmitter under construction in Djibouti is expected to be completed in March 2003.

Sawa can also be heard on the satellite channels of Nilesat, Arabsat and Eutelsat Hotbird, which reach listeners with radio satellite dishes throughout the Middle East. In June, Sawa began streaming audio on its Internet site (www.radiosawa.com). Pattiz said that step will help achieve its goal of interacting with listeners.

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Eventually, a satellite television station for Arab countries may be launched. A debate in Congress on the subject has thus far been inconclusive.

Newscast Content

Since its inception, Sawa has been running 48 newscasts a day, ranging from three to 10 minutes each, depending on the time of day. There also are occasional specials, including one on Sept. 11, 2002, that featured interviews with leading Mideast intellectuals and writers. The programming also includes interviews with administration officials, policy speeches translated into Arabic and public service announcements that warn against drunk driving and drug use.

Sawa vows balance in its news output, but there is an ongoing debate over how much airtime, if any, should be given to Islamic militants and their supporters. "VOA does not give a platform to terrorists, extremists or any special interest group," says Broadcasting Board of Governors spokeswoman Joan Mower.

But following that seemingly straightforward guideline has not proved easy. *New York Times* columnist William Safire reported in July that then-VOA director Robert Reilly, on four occasions in one week, had to pull stories from MERN that featured Arab justification of suicide bombing. Safire also expressed outrage that VOA had given air time to Yasir al Serri, who warned that Americans must make no accusations against Islamists "before knowing the full truth." What irked Safire was that the broadcast failed to say that al Serri had served as spokesman for Gama'a Islamiyya, a group that killed 58 foreign tourists and four Egyptians in a terrorist bombing in Egypt in 1997.

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Mower said a VOA inquiry found that the piece needed "more development and context" and should have called attention to the group's responsibility for the 1997 attack.

Safire was also unnerved by an award (the Tex Harris Award for constructive dissent by a Foreign Service specialist) bestowed in June on the VOA's Andre de Nesnera by the American Foreign Service Association, for the "courage to challenge the system from within." De Nesnera had refused to yield to State Department pressure not to air an interview with Taliban leader Mohammed Omar after the Sept. 11 attacks, though VOA did accompany the interview with U.S. government commentary. He currently runs the VOA newsroom, with responsibility for all VOA services except MERN.

An Uncertain Impact

It's too early to predict whether Sawa will have its desired impact. Mower says the station's Internet comments page receives about 50

e-mails a day, most of them favorable. But Ayman El-Amir, writing for the weekly online service of *Al-Ahram*, Egypt's leading newspaper, says Sawa has an intriguing flaw: "If the U.S. government will invest millions of dollars to let 'us' know 'them,' will it also strive to let 'them' know 'us'?" he asks. "We must stand up and postulate the outrageous assumption that in order for us to know the American people, appreciate their ideals and value systems, they, too will have to know the same about us. Otherwise, the result will be a lopsided knowledge, a case of unrequited love."

Ayman Bardawil, a Palestinian broadcaster with al-Quds Educational TV in Ramallah in the West Bank, praised Sawa's mostly music format. "We have plenty of local stations for pop music — but it's only Arabic music," he said, quoted by *The New York Times*. But he spoke contemptuously of the news content. "I am fed up with hearing everything through the American filters — how the president reacts to this and how the American government is reacting to whatever is happening, rather than the action itself." He wondered whether the news on Sawa might prevent some people from listening to the music instead of the other way around. If they find the news hard to swallow, at least they will be able to wash it down with the crooning of Amr Diab: "Habibi, Habibi ya nour elain, Ya sakin khayali ... (My darling, my darling, the light of my eyes, you live in my dreams ...)."

Pattiz knows that winning hearts and minds won't be easy, and he is careful not to overpromise. "Will they like us when they know us in an accurate fashion?" he asks. "Put it this way. We stand a better chance." ■