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CAIRO 2686

From: AMEMBASSY CAIRO

MRN: 2686

Date/Time: 060515Z APR 04

Subject: EGYPT: DOUBTS PERSIST ABOUT AL
HURRA TV

ICNbr: 05977353

Precedence: PRIORITY

Cable Text:

INFO: DSO-01 AMAS-01 ARC-01 BB-01 BGC-01 B\NE-01 EAA-01 EPEU-01
EX-01 E2-01 RNA-01

AMADS AMADS 097/1140Z (TOTAL COPIES: 11)

ACTION BGC-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	AMAD-00	CIAE-00	INL-00	DODE-00
	DOFE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00	EAP-00	EB-00	FAAE-00	UTED-00
	VC-00	H-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IC-00	VCE-00	M-00
	NEA-00	NSAE-00	EPAU-00	PER-00	SP-00	TEST-00	USIE-00
	R-00	EPAE-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	G-00	SAS-00	/000W

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P 060515Z APR 04

FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5034

INFO ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS CAIRO 002686

STATE FOR R, PASS TO BGC; ALSO FOR NEA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL; KPAO; EG

SUBJECT: EGYPT: DOUBTS PERSIST ABOUT AL HURRA TV

REF: CAIRO 1275 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: AFTER SIX WEEKS OF BROADCASTS, EGYPTIAN PUBLIC SKEPTICISM AND CRITICISM OF AL HURRA TV CONTINUES. THE LOCAL PRESS STILL RUNS OCCASIONAL PIECES CRITICIZING THE STATION'S NEWS PROGRAMS AS PURE PROPAGANDA, ALTHOUGH ANECDOTAL REPORTS INDICATE SOME PEOPLE HERE FIND ITS DOCUMENTARIES AND NON-NEWS PROGRAMS INTERESTING. NEVERTHELESS, AL HURRA'S SLOW RESPONSE TO FAST-BREAKING EVENTS SUCH AS SHEIKH YASSIN'S KILLING AND THE CANCELLATION OF THE ARAB SUMMIT IN TUNIS HAS HURT ITS ABILITY TO ATTRACT A WIDER AUDIENCE. END SUMMARY.

2. EGYPTIAN MEDIA AND PUBLIC CRITICISM OF AL HURRA TV HAS CONTINUED THROUGHOUT ITS FIRST SIX WEEKS ON THE AIR. THE LATEST ATTACK ON THE STATION CAME IN A COVER STORY IN THE APRIL 1 EDITION OF THE MONTHLY MAGAZINE AL SHEBAB ("YOUTH") WHICH RAN THE HEADLINE: "WHO WILL PROTECT YOUTH FROM THE POISONS OF THE AMERICAN TV CHANNEL AL HURRA?" THE STORY DETAILED PREDOMINANTLY CRITICAL REMARKS BY SEVERAL COMMENTATORS, INCLUDING THE

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DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF MASS COMMUNICATION AT CAIRO UNIVERSITY, WHO COMMENTED THAT "THE STATION IS NOT FREE, AS THEY SAY. AMERICA IS REPRESSING FREEDOM IN PALESTINE AND IN IRAQ, SO HOW COULD IT MAKE US BELIEVE ITS PRINCIPLES OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY? THE ARAB VIEWER SHOULD NOT FALL INTO THE TRAP OF AL HURRA. IT IS DEFENDING US FOREIGN POLICY." HOWEVER, THE ARTICLE ALSO INCLUDED A MORE BALANCED REMARK BY HALA HASHISH, THE DIRECTOR OF THE EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT'S NILE TELEVISION STATION, WHO SAID THERE WAS A POSITIVE ASPECT TO AL HURRA IN THAT IT IS TRYING TO CONDUCT A DIALOGUE, AND ITS PRESENCE WOULD LEAD TO COMPETITION AMONG ALL ARABIC LANGUAGE STATIONS.

3. PRIVATE COMMENTS MADE TO EMBASSY OFFICERS HAVE BEEN GENERALLY, BUT NOT TOTALLY, CRITICAL OF THE STATION. A FEW CONTACTS TOLD US THEY WERE INTERESTED IN THE ENTERTAINMENT OR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS SHOWN ON AL HURRA. FOR EXAMPLE, SEVERAL CONTACTS HAVE EXPRESSED SURPRISE AND FRUSTRATION WITH THE TECHNICAL GLITCHES THAT APPARENTLY HAVE NOT YET BEEN COMPLETELY IRONED OUT. IN A RECENT NEWS PROGRAM, FOR INSTANCE, THE TELEPROMPTER APPARENTLY MALFUNCTIONED BRIEFLY, AND THE NEWSCASTERS APPEARED UTTERLY NONPLUSED. THESE TECHNICAL GLITCHES, WHILE NOT PERVASIVE, CONTRAST POORLY TO THE HIGHLY PROFESSIONAL AND SMOOTH BROADCASTS ON THE MOST WATCHED ARABIC NEWS STATIONS SUCH AS AL JAZEERA AND AL ARABIYA.

4. MORE IMPORTANTLY, COMMENTS ECHO A STEADY REFRAIN THAT MUCH OF THE PROGRAMMING ON AL HURRA IS EITHER "IRRELEVANT" OR BORING. PERHAPS THE MOST STRIKING EXAMPLE OF THIS CAME ON THE MORNING OF SHEIKH YASSIN'S KILLING. WHEREAS AL JAZEERA AND OTHER STATIONS QUICKLY INTERRUPTED THEIR REGULAR PROGRAMMING TO BRING EMOTIONAL, LIVE, AND VIRTUALLY UNINTERRUPTED REPORTS FROM THEIR CORRESPONDENTS, AL HURRA CONTINUED THEIR (SUBTITLED) BROADCAST OF A DOCUMENTARY ON GENERAL CUSTER. WHEN THE STATION DID FINALLY REPORT THE NEWS, IT ALIENATED THE AVERAGE ARAB VIEWER BY QUOTING WIRE SERVICE REPORTS AND INTERVIEWING THE HEAD OF ISRAELI RADIO. ANOTHER CONTACT TOLD US THAT WHEN THE ARAB SUMMIT IN TUNIS WAS ABRUPTLY POSTPONED THIS WEEK, AL HURRA WAS BEHIND THE OTHER STATIONS IN REPORTING THE NEWS, AND, IN FACT, HAD NEWSREADERS STILL PREVIEWING THE SUMMIT WHILE THEIR COMPETITORS WERE REPORTING THE POSTPONEMENT FLASH. WE HAVE ALSO HEARD MANY CONTACTS COMPLAIN THAT THE ANNOUNCERS OFTEN SEEM LESS ATTRACTIVE AND MORE AMATEURISH COMPARED TO THEIR PEERS ON OTHER STATIONS. ONE MAN WHO WORKS IN THE LOCAL MEDIA SUPPORTS THE IDEA OF AL HURRA, BUT SAID THE ANNOUNCERS WERE "TERRIBLE."

5. A FEW POSITIVE COMMENTS HAVE BEEN HEARD ABOUT THE STATION, SUCH AS THE TAXI DRIVER WHO TOLD US HE ENJOYED WATCHING AN INTERVIEW WITH SAAD EDDINE IBRAHIM (ALTHOUGH HE ALSO FELT THE STATION PRAISED ISRAEL EXCESSIVELY), AND ANOTHER SAID HE SOMETIMES WATCHES THE NATURE PROGRAMS WITH

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HIS CHILDREN. STILL, THE MAJORITY OF CONTACTS WE HAVE ASKED ABOUT THE CHANNEL HAVE NOT YET WATCHED IT FOR ANY LENGTHY PERIOD OF TIME, AND THE MEDIA CRITICISM HAS PREDISPOSED THEM TO BE SKEPTICAL.

6. COLLECTING OBJECTIVE DATA ON AL HURRA'S MARKET SHARE HERE IS DIFFICULT. WE HAVE SEEN ONE SMALL SAMPLE, A POLL IN AN EGYPTIAN ARABIC-LANGUAGE WEBSITE, THAT ASKED ITS USERS WHICH SATELLITE STATIONS THEY WATCHED. WHILE THE METHODOLOGY IS NOT VERY SCIENTIFIC, THE "MARKET SHARE" NUMBERS ARE ILLUMINATING: AL JAZEERA (50 PERCENT); AL ARABIYA (21.2 PERCENT); OTHER (13.8 PERCENT); NONE (8.5 PERCENT); BBC (3.8 PERCENT); CNN (1.5 PERCENT) AL HURRA (1.2 PERCENT).

WELCH

End Cable Text

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