

## **Questions That Beg More Questions—And “Answers” That Obfuscate: A reply to MBN on Alhurra**

The [15-page, 5200 word response](#) from Middle East Broadcasting Networks “(MBN)” on Alhurra obscures the truth about its operations, implicitly confirms devastating aspects of ProPublica’s investigations, and consistently plays word games ill-becoming of those entrusted with public money.

Despite MBN’s spin that Alhurra’s problems are behind it, ProPublica has found that mismanagement has continued-- with questionable personnel decisions, lax controls of various kinds, and persistent factionalism. Most important, Alhurra continues to fall short of its own goal of becoming a strong voice in the Middle East. A few specifics that remain unchallenged (and thus, given the length and detail of MBN’s response might be presumed admitted):

- A reporter who Congress was assured last year had been dismissed from MBN’s Alhurra continued to work for MBN’s Radio Sawa until last month;
- Government Accountability Office inspectors were intentionally deceived in 2006 when a more junior producer, at the request of his bosses, posed in a meeting with them as the executive producer of Alhurra’s Iraq broadcast;
- Alhurra has continued to pay influential Washington figures to be guests on its broadcasts, some of them unusual choices for the roles, such as having the former Israeli ambassador to Washington explain the New Hampshire primary to an Arab audience;
- There has never been an audit or inventory of Alhurra’s troubled Baghdad bureau.

We would welcome a further MBN or Broadcasting Board of Governors response on these specific points.

Many of the items in the MBN letter don’t merit response. But some, which seem quite specific, do. Here, then, is a response to MBN’s response—some clarity on the facts for interested readers.

ProPublica wrote that Brian Conniff, Alhurra’s president, “has no journalism experience.” When read carefully, MBN’s response trumpets Mr. Conniff’s experience as an executive of two international broadcasting entities, but glosses over the key point here: Mr. Conniff had never worked as a journalist before assuming the top job responsible for Alhurra’s journalism. We’re not sure what to make of MBN’s point that we omitted “Ambassador Glassman’s comments that the VOA Director does not speak the many languages his organization broadcasts in”, but it hardly seems like a point of pride for the Broadcasting Board of Governors. In any event, the central point remains that Mr. Conniff’s organization broadcasts in a single language, Arabic, that he does not speak.

Similarly, MBN responds to ProPublica’s point that Daniel Nassif, Alhurra’s news director “has no background in television”—but does not dispute that Mr. Nassif had never worked in television before becoming the news director of this television channel. MBN says that, prior to joining Radio Sawa Mr. Nassif was “[i]n no way...helping to promote the political aspirations of

any individual.” In fact, no fewer than five statements by Mr. Nassif from the later part of 1998 appear in the news archive of the web site [www.generalaoun.org](http://www.generalaoun.org).

We’re glad to learn that, since 2005, all of the reports on Radio Sawa by Ahmed Amin have been saved. We hereby renew our request for copies. Mr. Amin is the correspondent who reported for Alhurra from the 2006 Holocaust deniers conference, and whose employment status was the subject of congressional testimony and [an evolving set of explanations](#).

We reported that Mr. Conniff “sat in on a morning editorial meeting” on the day in June when the 60 Minutes team visited Alhurra. He stood outside the door of the room where the meeting was held, and we have posted a correction to this effect. The story was correct that he could not understand what was going in the meeting because it was conducted in Arabic. The MBN response says that Mr. Conniff only attends meetings conducted in English. In an interview, news director Nassif said all editorial meetings are held in Arabic. Translations are not provided for Conniff.

MBN does not deny that financial records requested by auditors have not been produced and that some financial records are in disarray. Its statement notes that Alhurra has received “clean” opinions from auditors for the last three years, and we have corrected our June 30 post on this point, but “clean” opinions do not guarantee acceptable levels of management controls. For instance, in a letter Conniff sent to Larry Register, Conniff referenced a 2005 series of articles in The American Prospect magazine detailing Alhurra’s financial mismanagement, specifically with regard to sole-source contracts awarded to friends of a former news director. Conniff wrote that, “A subsequent State Department Inspector General audit could not determine whether the contracts were properly awarded because no records were available to examine.”

ProPublica reported that, “No one translates the full broadcasts into English, making it nearly impossible for non-Arabic speakers to effectively know what is going on the air.” MBN says “Each week numerous hours of Alhurra’s programming [out of three 24-hour channels] and an hour of Radio Sawa programming [out of seven feeds] are available on the Web.” Precisely.

MBN says that ProPublica used “Wikipedia (a flawed source) as a source of information about the BBG, instead of the BBG’s actual Web site. The BBG’s Web site would have made it clear that Mark McKinnon is no longer a Board member and has not been since Dec. 31, 2007.” Careful readers of the story will be confused here. Wikipedia is not cited as a source anywhere in the story. Instead, Apture pop-up windows from Wikipedia provide background on the BBG and the Voice of America for readers who want to know more. In addition, the story’s sidebar, “[Alhurra: Who is Accountable?](#)” *does* link to the BBG site. The ProPublica story never mentions Mr. McKinnon, so we’re not sure what difference is made by this outdated information on Wikipedia. And we’d suggest that someone at MBN update the Wikipedia entries, as many public information offices do.

MBN is correct that the Alberto Fernandez’s e-mail to Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes was dated March 2007, not May, and we have posted a correction to this effect.

MBN refers to a 2004 cable from U.S. diplomats in Cairo. ProPublica does not have portions of this document beyond the first two pages. We are endeavoring to get a copy of the rest of the document and will add it to the pages we have posted when and if we receive it—and would welcome a copy from MBN.

ProPublica's story referred to and posted "a never-released report by the State Department's Inspector General shared with ProPublica found 'irregularities in contracting,' a hiring process that 'may have been marred by favoritism toward Lebanese candidates or candidates of Lebanese ancestry,' and a 'lack of strategic goals and objectives.'" MBN says the report was "never released by the OIG and, in fact, was withdrawn by the Inspector General, because it was so flawed that it did not meet the OIG's minimum standards for accuracy and objectivity." In fact, Amb. Anne Patterson, a career foreign service officer who served as acting IG, signed the report. Patterson was replaced by Cameron Hume, a political appointee, who withdrew it.

ProPublica reported that "Alhurra is the number four network in Iraq, behind Al Jazeera and two others." While Alhurra is indeed number four, MBN points out that Al Jazeera actually ranks behind Alhurra in these ratings, which are by Inter/Media, and we are correcting this point. MBN does not dispute, because it cannot, that Alhurra generally lags far behind Al Jazeera in the region, and on important measures in Iraq as well. In fact, the same [September 2007 Inter/Media survey](#) found that Alhurra ranked fifth, behind Al Jazeera, as the "most important source of information for Iraqis" and eighth out of eight sources as the "most trusted source of information," again behind Al Jazeera, according to a BBG report on Inter/Media's findings.

James Glassman had served for one year as chairman of the BBG, and not just for the six months before our first story; we have posted a correction to this effect.

As we reported, Washington Examiner reporter Bill Sammon appeared as a paid guest on Alhurra three days after he published a brief interview of Alhurra employee Julie Zann, who books guests for the network's news shows. MBN decries as "false" the "innuendo" of a relationship "by anything other than time" between these events. On [July 21](#), the Examiner's executive editor released a statement in response to our story indicating that there had been "one case in which one of our reporters accepted an honorarium that we thought might create an appearance of a conflict and we immediately directed the reporter to not accept honoraria of that nature."

ProPublica reported that Mishan Jabouri, "interviewed [on Alhurra last year] by phone from Syria, was on the run from the U.S. military and the Iraqi police. Interpol had issued a 'Wanted' poster for him and Iraq's parliament had stripped him of his diplomatic immunity because of his suspected ties to extremists." This is entirely accurate. We're not sure what to make of MBN's point that "Mr. Jabouri was not classified as a 'terrorist' until Jan. 9, 2008, by the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control—eight months after the program aired." Does this mean that Alhurra thinks it's OK to provide a forum for fugitives from the U.S. military and Interpol, just not those on the OFAC list?

ProPublica reported that "The business manager... sends thick envelopes of petty cash to Baghdad each month". The practice of sending cash is no longer in effect, and the story is being

corrected in this respect. But wires sent to the Baghdad bureau are still immediately converted into cash, with the records of how this is dispensed deficient, according to three people with direct knowledge of the process.

MBN “stands behind” the “journalistic credentials” of Salam Mashkour. But it does not dispute that, in 2006, a team of Government Accountability Office investigators “was introduced to a more junior producer who posed, at the request of his bosses” as Mr. Mashkour. Nor does it dispute ProPublica’s report that journalist Mashkour “danced in the studio” on the night Saddam Hussein was executed and “got into a physical fight” this May with Alhurra’s then-chief of the Baghdad bureau.