

## TV Aims to Bridge Reality Gap Between US and Arab World

A show broadcast on a Saudi-backed channel is tackling negative attitudes by introducing Arabs to an America they may not be familiar with. Roula Khalaf reports.

**By ROULA KHALAF**

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A recent survey of public opinion in six Arab countries, conducted for the Brookings Institution in Washington, makes for sober reading at the White House.

The poll shows that President George W. Bush is the most disliked world leader, while Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Lebanon's Islamist Hizbollah group, is the most popular.

As the US struggles with its image in the region, a group of former officials and diplomats, Democrat and Republican, is trying to come to the rescue, unveiling the results of what they hope will help bridge the gap between Arabs and Americans.

**Layalina** Productions, a television content provider that counts an impressive board of advisers, including George Bush, the former US president, and James Baker, the former secretary of state, is behind a reality television show that aims to portray America in a more appealing light.

On the Road to America, now being aired on the popular Saudi-backed pan-Arab MBC channel, tracks Arab students travelling across the US on a 10-week journey.

"This is people-to-people diplomacy between the American and the Arab public," says Leon Shahabian, a spokesman for **Layalina**.

"It's trying to introduce viewers to an America they may not be familiar with. The show's characters come from different parts of the Arab world, different ages, and react differently to American situations."

With a look that is more Hollywood than White House, the show may well appeal to Arab viewers, many of whom are already enamoured with American soap operas and films.

Yet analysts say it is unlikely to change Arab attitudes towards the US.

"Everyone (in the Arab world) watches all kinds of American shows, but people differentiate between good action films and policies," says Dalia Mogahed, the executive director of Gallup's Muslim studies centre. Gallup polls show that opinion of the US has become steadily less favourable since 2002. Though Arabs and Muslims say they admire western technology and democracy,

and associate it most with the US, they disapprove of what they perceive as moral decadence and US disrespect for Muslims.

Yet anti-American sentiment among Muslims, says Mr Mogahed, is still mostly driven by politics, and US involvement in conflicts such as the Iraq war. Among Arabs in particular, the US attitude in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains a big issue.

Headed by Marc Ginsberg, a former US ambassador to Morocco, **Layalina** was launched as a bipartisan effort after the attacks of September 11, with the original goal, according to advisers at the time, of starting a television channel geared towards the Muslim world.

But having soon discovered that the market was already overcrowded - there are 250 television channels in the region - **Layalina**, a non-profit organisation that relies on donations, opted to be a content provider.

On the Road to America, produced with a Hollywood group and a company owned by MBC, is one of several series in the making.

It is too early to gauge the reaction of viewers. The show so far has received some attention in the American media but hardly a mention in the Arab press.

Arab analysts are sceptical that **Layalina's** approach will work where government-sponsored public diplomacy has failed.

"The US attitude is always, we deal with everything but the politics," says Mohamed al-Sayed Said, an analyst with Cairo's al-Ahram Centre for Strategic Studies.

"Whether in public or any other diplomacy, you are dealing with Arabs who feel humiliated and targeted."

Mazen Hayek, the head of MBC's marketing and public relations, says the station's interest in buying On the Road to America was to show that there was common ground between Americans and Arabs despite US foreign policy. Although American entertainment is popular in the region, it provides only a "snapshot" of the country.

"On the Road to America has an unpolished image of America through the eyes of students, normal people. It feels real, and it shows cross-cultural interaction," he says.

With the Middle East racked by conflicts, most of which involve the US, the political images will no doubt continue to overshadow lighter appeals for understanding between the Arab world and the US.

But **Layalina** faces another challenge: to survive in a market that is still undeveloped. To attract donations, the company must find enough stations in the region to pay for its shows and convince its contributors that it is reaching a big audience.

According to MBC, 10 out of the 250 free-to-air satellite stations in the Arab world account for 80 per cent of the Dollars 550m (Euros 424m, Pounds 282m) broadcast advertising market and 60 per cent of the audience.

"The difficulty is to raise money for the shows," says Mr Shahabian of **Layalina**.

"Television channels aren't making a lot of money so can't pay us a lot of money."

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