United States Department of State
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors
Office of Inspector General

Survey of the Broadcasting Board of Governors' Middle East Broadcasting Activities and Initiatives

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By letter dated January 16, 2002, Senator Jesse Helms, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked the Office of Inspector General (OIG) of the Department of State (Department) and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) to review the BBG's broadcast activities in the Middle East to date. He also asked OIG to evaluate the BBG's plans for a new initiative to broadcast to the Middle East by radio, the Middle East Radio Network (MERN). (See Appendix A.)

MERN is designed to provide an alternative to the media in the region, which is generally reflective of local government policy and hostile to the policies, viewpoints, and interests of the United States. MERN is intended to be a credible source of news and information about both the countries in the region and the United States.

Specifically, OIG was asked to determine whether:

"(1) U.S. positions will be best presented through strong existing foreign commercial radio and television outlets in the Middle East media 'marketplace;'

"(2) BBG is capable of managing a project related to such sensitive U.S. policy interests without a far more careful review by the State Department and/or White House supervisory role;

"(3) the VOA [Voice of America] can effectively serve as the institutional home for a network melding both surrogate broadcasting and broadcasting about America;

"(4) . . . a network [can] remain consistent with U.S. interests if its personnel are resident nationals in Middle Eastern and other Muslim countries; and

"(5) . . . editorial control [can] be realistically implemented from Washington"

Additionally, OIG was asked to review how "the BBG—as currently constituted—has responded to, and supported, U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Middle East."

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RESULTS IN BRIEF

Generally, OIG's conclusions (presented below in the order of the questions recited above) are as follows:

1. U.S. positions cannot be presented better through existing media outlets in the Middle East. As noted above, most of these outlets are reflective of the official policies and positions of their respective governments. And, those media generally present a negative view of the United States and its policies and positions. Furthermore, even if Middle East media were receptive to providing a forum for America to make its case to the people in the region, too few American broadcasters and diplomats have the language proficiency credibly to make that case. While efforts are underway to increase the ranks of officers who can speak the requisite languages, these efforts are unlikely to bear fruit any time soon.

2. BBG is capable of making the vision of MERN a reality; provided, ways are found to reconcile the tension inherent in the applicable statutes between the BBG's "professional independence and integrity" [1] and its obligation to broadcast in a manner "consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States." [2] The Department must avail itself fully of the opportunity afforded by its seat on the board of the BBG to advise BBG regularly of its policies, positions, and viewpoints with regard to issues related to the Middle East. Additionally, the idea of the Department's providing full-time public diplomacy advisers to BBG, similar to political advisers provided by the Department to unified theater military commanders, should be considered, to provide a daily point of contact as to such policies, positions, and viewpoints.

3. As both a surrogate broadcaster (i.e., one that broadcasts about the countries in the region) and one that broadcasts about America, MERN can function within VOA's organizational framework. Such programming is not prohibited by law. Moreover, VOA, which primarily broadcasts about America, already does some surrogate broadcasting of its own in Africa. And, to the extent that MERN ultimately expands to television, VOA, which does it own television broadcasting, can serve as a model.

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[1] 22 U.S.C. 6204 (d).

[2] 22 U.S.C. 6202 (a)(1).

4. MERN can remain consistent with U.S. interests if its personnel are resident nationals of Middle East and other Muslim countries; provided, the requisite editorial controls are in place. Those controls include editing of news stories by a bilingual American broadcaster, so that items likely to spark controversy are caught before transmission. Furthermore, given the dearth of American broadcasters who are fluent in the languages of the region, at least for the foreseeable future, there is no alternative to relying on resident national broadcasters.

5. Appropriate editorial control can be implemented from Washington, as long as there is a pre-broadcast review by an American.

6. BBG has responded to and supported U.S. foreign policy interests in the Middle East. Its language reviews and audience surveys have identified the region as priority. It surged broadcasts to the region following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. But, there have been some controversial broadcasts that have been deemed by critics to be inconsistent with American foreign policy interests. And, even BBG concedes that its efforts to reach Middle East audiences have been largely unsuccessful. Indeed, it is this recognition that led BBG to conceive of MERN.

We make recommendations to BBG and the Department, as applicable, to (1) develop the internal language proficiency needed credibly to articulate American policies and viewpoints in Middle Eastern media outlets; (2) consider placing public diplomacy advisers with MERN; and (3) introduce as much news programming in MERN broadcasts as possible as quickly as possible. BBG and the Department agree with the recommendations, with the exception of the recommendation for public diplomacy advisers, which the Department supports but BBG finds unacceptable and unnecessary. Agency comments are included in Appendices H and I.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

So as to assist in the consideration of priorities in the FY 2003 budget cycle, OIG was asked to submit its report by March 15, 2002. (OIG subsequently sought and obtained an extension until April 1, 2002). Accordingly, this report was produced under a tight deadline. It is not the exhaustive examination that OIG would have conducted under normal circumstances. Because of the importance of the issues discussed herein and widespread interest in them, OIG intends to undertake a more detailed examination of MERN as soon after its first anniversary as possible.

In conducting this survey, OIG held discussions with key officials, editors, researchers, program and technical directors, and staff members of MERN, VOA, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia, the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB). These discussions were conducted in Washington, Miami, and Prague. Additionally, OIG interviewed senior Department officials, including experts from the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA), the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, as well as officials from the National Security Council (NSC) and the Office of Management and Budget. Furthermore, key personnel of the Arabic service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) were interviewed in London. A wide variety of documentation was examined as well. (See Appendix B.)

OIG's office of International Broadcasting Oversight (IBO) conducted this survey in accordance with the standards of the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency. Major contributors to this report were Louis A. McCall, IBO director; Lenora Fuller, auditor-in-charge; and Matthew E. Glockner, management analyst.

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BACKGROUND

BBG's broadcast principles and standards state that U.S. international broadcasting should have "maximum impact" to support strategic interests and to reach a significant audience. Assessed by those standards, VOA's Middle East broadcasts were found by BBG to be wanting in three respects: (1) signal quality; [3] (2) relevance of programming; and (3) lack of programming in different Arabic dialects. Furthermore, a BBG survey found that only 1-2% of people in the Middle East acknowledged listening to its broadcasts.

These findings led the BBG to conclude, even before September 11, 2001, that efforts to reach the Middle East more broadly and effectively had to be intensified. The idea of MERN was conceived during a February 2001 visit to the region by two BBG board members. The visit was prompted in part by ongoing regional instabilities, including the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Because about 60 percent of the population of Middle East countries is 25 years old or younger, MERN's target audience is young people. (See Appendix C.) To ensure that MERN reaches its target audience, the IBB Research Office contracted with a major U.S. research company with extensive experience in radio, both domestically and overseas. In coordination with local subcontractors in the Middle East, the research company conducted target audience focus groups and surveys during the months of September through November, 2001. The research company concluded that the target audience's interest in news is very low, and that MERN will face "a challenge to get the listeners through the news as they no doubt wait for the music programming to come back on."

Accordingly, MERN plans to begin by broadcasting for a period of time only music of a kind popular with Arab and Muslim young people in the region. Thereafter, MERN would introduce short newscasts at regular intervals during the course of the hour. After that, news coverage would gradually expand to encompass an even larger portion of programming.

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[3] Signal quality is a register on a scale of 1 to 5 of whether the programs are capable of being heard by the target audiences. On the scale, 1 is nil, 2 is poor, 3 is fair, 4 is good, and 5 is excellent.

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FINDINGS

OBJECTIVE 1. EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSED STRUCTURE OF MERN AND ITS PLACE, ORGANIZATIONALLY

Q1. Would U.S. positions best be presented through strong existing foreign commercial radio and television outlets in the Middle East media "marketplace"?

From interviews and research, OIG determined that there are only a small number of commercial radio and television outlets in the Middle East. The two principal players are the Qatari-based Al-Jazeera and the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC). While Al-Jazeera is more widely known in this country, MBC, actually, has the larger audience. On the whole, Middle East broadcasts reflect the official policies of their governments, and broadcasts regarding America and its policies, viewpoints, and culture are either limited or hostile.

Furthermore, even if existing media in the region were receptive to providing a forum for America to present its own policies, viewpoints, and culture directly to Middle East audiences, there are only a small number of Foreign Service officers with a level of proficiency in Arabic and the other regional languages credibly to make America's case. According to those we interviewed and our own research, there are no more than ten, and perhaps as few as one person who can speak Arabic well enough to do a live broadcast.

A recent General Accounting Office (GAO) study noted that the Department does not have a plan to address this shortcoming and recommended that one be put in place.[4] In any event, realistically, it will be many years, if then, before Department diplomats can take advantage of any opportunities to use existing Middle East media to promulgate pro-American views.

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[4] Foreign Languages: Workforce Planning Could Help Address Staffing and Proficiency Shortfalls (GAO-02-514T, March 12, 2002).

Recommendation 1: The Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources of the Department of State should design and implement a plan to develop the internal language proficiency needed credibly to articulate American policies and viewpoints in Middle Eastern media outlets.

The Department strongly supports this recommendation and believes it now has programs underway to address this deficiency. BBG also agrees with this recommendation and believes it will greatly enhance the effectiveness of Department representatives' participation in news interviews and other programs employed by MERN.

Q2. Is BBG capable of managing a project related to such sensitive U.S. policy interests without a far more careful review by the State Department and/or White House supervisory role?

The concern about whether BBG alone can make MERN the vehicle for advancing American interests in the Middle East that its supporters hope it will be arises principally from two VOA broadcasts following the terrorist attacks of last September. The first broadcast featured a member of one of Egypt's most violent terrorist groups now living in exile in London under the threat of a death sentence by Egypt's courts. In that broadcast, his terrorist history was not identified. That broadcast drew criticism and complaints as being antithetical to American interests. Then on September 25, 2001, VOA broadcasted an interview with the now deposed leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar. Detractors decried the broadcast as providing a platform to a discredited and deposed leader hostile to the United States.

After those broadcasts, the BBG Chairman was called by the House International Relations Committee to testify about them. In that testimony, the Chairman acknowledged that the VOA editorial review process was not without its flaws. Accordingly, VOA later established guidelines, in consultation with the Department and the NSC, designed to ensure that future broadcasts are, indeed, consistent with U.S. foreign policy objectives. (See Objective 2)

While the guidelines are certainly a step in the right direction, concerns remain as to whether additional input is required from the Department and/or the NSC to ensure that the views of the United States are being effectively presented. That said, there is a tension in the applicable statutes between BBG's "professional independence and integrity" and its obligation to broadcast in a manner "consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States."

There is broad agreement now, since a June 18, 1992, inter-agency decision of the Deputies Committee (a committee of cabinet level agency Deputy Secretaries), that editorials that purport to convey U.S. government policy require Department approval. Disagreement arises over where the line should be drawn between the aforementioned imperatives as regards news gathering and reporting. As long as both provisions remain in the law, these tensions will remain.

It is for Congress alone to decide whether this tension should be ever resolved in favor of one imperative or another. Failing that, MERN, as a part of VOA, can accomplish its mission; provided, the Department fully avails itself of the opportunity afforded by its seat on the BBG board to advise BBG regularly of American policies, positions, and viewpoints with regard to issues related to the Middle East. It is statutorily required that the Secretary of State, or his designee (the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs), "provide information and guidance on foreign policy issues to the Board, as the Secretary may deem appropriate." [5]

Prior to the consolidation of the United States Information Agency (USIA) into the Department, U.S. international broadcasters had foreign policy guidance directly available to them on an ad hoc basis in the person of USIA Foreign Service officers who were occasionally assigned as language service branch chiefs. In that capacity, they provided area expertise and guidance on U.S. policy with respect to the countries covered by the service they managed.

While the Secretary's designated seat on the BBG board provides for foreign policy input, the Board is a part-time one and it meets only once a month. The foreign policy guidance given is to the Board, with no mechanism for ensuring that this guidance is communicated to the broadcasters.

Public diplomacy advisers need to be detailed from the Department to provide daily guidance to MERN. These public diplomacy advisers would provide daily guidance to MERN as to official U.S. government policy with respect to the Middle East. To similar effect are so-called "POLADS," political advisers serving U.S. unified theater military commanders. The advisers at MERN would have no editorial control there or at VOA; but, they would provide working level input that, coupled with the Department's vigorous use of its seat on the BBG, could provide additional assurance that official views are being heard and communicated.

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[5] 22 U.S.C. 6205.

MERN POLAD equivalents could be selected on the basis of requirements developed by BBG. BBG could select candidates based on their skills, their knowledge of the region, its culture, language(s), and their expertise in and sensitivity to journalistic issues. While assigned to MERN, public diplomacy advisers would function as members of the MERN staff, reporting directly to and receiving annual performance ratings from either the MERN director or the director of the Middle East Programming Centre (MEPC) in Dubai. Public diplomacy advisers could be an asset in contacts with Middle East government officials in helping to negotiate frequencies, locations, and the like.

As stated earlier, Section 303(a)(1) of the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994 requires that broadcasts be "consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States." As recent events have demonstrated, there needs to be a mechanism in place to help ensure that result. Our recommendation proposes such a mechanism. While the legislative history of the act indicates that the Secretary of State should not be involved in the "management or day-to-day decision making of the agency or any of its operations or programs such as international broadcasting or otherwise," [6] it does not prohibit the provision of advice or assistance by the Secretary or his designees in connection with international broadcasting. Furthermore, the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act makes clear that the Secretary of State's authority to provide foreign policy guidance to the Board may be exercised at his discretion.[7] We believe, then, that our recommendation stays within the bounds of the law.

Recommendation 2: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a program, in coordination with the Department of State, to place public diplomacy advisers with the Middle East Radio Network at the disposition of the program director in Washington, D.C., and/or the director of the Middle East Programming Centre in Dubai.

BBG does not agree with this recommendation, finding it to be both unacceptable and unnecessary. BBG strongly believes that the placement of political advisers within MERN would breach the "firewall" between broadcasters and policymakers. In addition, BBG believes that it already has routine yet robust contacts with the Department. Although the Department fully concurs with this recommendation, it notes the need to discuss implementation with the Board, given the Board's concern about "firewall issues."

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[6] S. REP. NO. 103-107, 103rd Cong., 2nd Sess. 356 (1993).

[7] H.R. CONF. REP. NO. 105-825, 105th Cong., 2nd Sess. 129 (1998).

OIG disagrees with the BBG position. While OIG recognizes BBG's proper concern about firewall issues, OIG does not believe that the advisers called for in the recommendation would breach the firewall. Their principal activity would be to provide MERN management with advice. They would not be involved in editing the content of individual news stories. They would be advisers and not decision makers. The extent of this advisory role would be carefully worked out, in consultation with the Department, with due sensitivity for firewall considerations. Given time zone differences between Washington, D.C. and the Middle East, OIG believes that it is especially important that an adviser be located at the MEPC in Dubai. Assuming the Department's Legal Adviser agrees with the OIG position, and BBG continues to disagree, this dispute should be referred to the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel for an authoritative legal opinion.

Q3. Can the VOA effectively serve as the institutional home for a network melding both surrogate broadcasting and broadcasting about America?

Surrogate programming is broadcasting that focuses on local/host country news because domestic stations are not objective or balanced. OIG believes that VOA can, indeed, house an entity, MERN, designed to be both a surrogate broadcaster and one that focuses on the United States. First, while the VOA charter does not explicitly authorize surrogate programming, there is no legislative or regulatory proscription against VOA's doing surrogate programming.

Second, VOA, which, of course, is designed primarily to broadcast about America, already engages in surrogate programming in Angola, Nigeria, and other parts of Africa. From what OIG understands, VOA does so effectively.

Third, VOA is an appropriate home for MERN to the extent that it already has experience with television broadcasting. Within the IBB, of which VOA is a part, there is television experience also at OCB and WorldNet.[8] This is important because MERN plans to start limited television broadcasts in late FY 2003, so as to be competitive with the satellite TV networks that are popular in the region.

The structure and format of MERN will be different from that of previous VOA programming. MERN programs will have an interactive component, using such familiar commercial formats as questions of the day, listener email, person on the street interviews, and the like. MERN programming will feature a mix of music by both Middle East and Western artists and will also present official U.S. policy editorials. As such, MERN represents a new model for international broadcasting – a hybrid of traditional VOA programming about America and local broadcast streams.

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[8] OCB is the home of TV Marti. WorldNet Television is in the process of becoming VOA-TV.

While MERN could have been established under the auspices of RFE/RL, like Radio Free Iraq, or as a separate grantee,[9] OIG's understanding is that MERN is to be a part of VOA. Moreover, establishing MERN as a grantee would not expedite the process of building transmission facilities. With the exception of OCB medium wave and television transmissions, the IBB Office of Engineering and Technical Services provides transmission capabilities and services to all BBG broadcast entities, including grantees.

In addition, MERN, as part of IBB, will have security advantages over grantees, an important consideration given the threat that goes with being located in the region. As a broadcast entity under IBB, the U.S. direct-hire staff at MEPC in Dubai will be under chief of mission authority with regard to their physical security. High security standards set by the Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security must be met. American employees of grantees are not under chief of mission authority; they are employees of a private company. Especially in this post-September 11 environment, if security concerns are an issue with MERN, making MERN a part of VOA will subject it to more stringent requirements, making it safer presumably.

Moreover, it is BBG's view—but OIG was unable to verify this owing to time constraints—that host country governments were more receptive to MERN's being part of VOA than its being a grantee. Accordingly, it would have been difficult and time-consuming to have MERN operate in the region as a grantee. If doing so would be more difficult and time-consuming, this would undercut the principal advantage of the grantee structure, which is being free from Civil Service regulations and union rules.

The MERN director briefs the VOA director daily. He also reports to the BBG at its monthly meetings. There is a model within the IBB framework that would provide for greater MERN autonomy without its becoming a grantee.

OCB was likewise established as part of VOA; but, the director of OCB reports to the director of the IBB, not the director of VOA. Likewise here, the MERN director could report to the IBB director, as well as monthly to the BBG board. This degree of autonomy from the VOA would be consonant with MERN's unique nature, while being faithful to the Congress' organizational mandate.

OIG encourages BBG to consider having the VOA adopt the OCB organizational model for daily MERN operations and supervision, enabling the new radio network to take advantage of the VOA's broadcasting assets while maintaining a degree of autonomy without the necessity of becoming a grantee.

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[9] Grantees, by charter, are required to function as surrogate or alternative home service broadcasters in countries where an independent press is nonexistent or struggling to survive.

Q4. Can a network remain consistent with U.S. interests if its personnel are resident nationals in Middle Eastern and other Muslim countries?

As noted earlier, there are few Americans with the requisite language skills to broadcast credibly to Middle East countries. Accordingly, as a practical matter, MERN has no choice but to rely on resident Middle East nationals, at least for the foreseeable future. Over time, as and when the Department develops more credible speakers of Arabic and other regional languages, those personnel can supplement the local broadcasters upon whom MERN must initially rely.

Although MERN has no choice in this matter in the near term, using local broadcasters is not without advantages. If properly selected, MERN broadcasters will be well known in the applicable country or countries. They will be not just fluent in the requisite languages, dialects, and accents; they will also be familiar with local colloquialisms, culture, idiosyncrasies, and trends. As such, they are likely to have credibility with and to appeal to the local audience. It should be noted, too, that there is no legislative requirement that broadcasters be United States citizens.

The foregoing having been said, there is no question but that there are vulnerabilities in relying upon resident nationals to serve as MERN broadcasters. These vulnerabilities can be mitigated by ensuring that effective editorial controls are in place, which is the subject of the next question.

Q5. Can editorial control be realistically implemented from Washington?

MERN plans to station a bilingual American in Dubai who would edit all programming there and then send it to Washington for further editing. The only exception to additional Washington editing would be for "local" surrogate programming. There will be five different streams of broadcasting to the Middle East, which will include one stream of modern, classical Arabic and four streams of colloquial, sub-regional Arabic dialects. (See Appendices D and E.) This sub-regional programming would be edited in Dubai by the resident bilingual American; but, because of time constraints, it might not be sent to Washington for further editing. All broadcasts, then, will have at least one review by an American, and most will be reviewed by two Americans before transmission.

Although BBG advised OIG during the survey that broadcasts were to be delayed to permit any necessary editing, BBG subsequently saw no reason to add tape delays nor to refrain from transmitting in real time. OIG prefers that this additional control be retained.

By ensuring at least one pre-broadcast review by an American, OIG believes that MERN can be adequately overseen and monitored by the United States government, though again, OIG would prefer that BBG not transmit in real time as an additional control.

Objective 2. How Has BBG—As Currently Constituted—Responded to and Supported U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities in the Middle East?

BBG has certainly attempted to respond to and support U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Middle East, even before the creation of MERN and even before the terrorist attacks of last September 11.

For example, the Language Service Review identified the Middle East as a region where VOA could improve its broadcasting effectiveness. In August 1999, the IBB issued a report titled *Broadcasting into the Millennium* that addressed immediate and long-range requirements worldwide by region for radio, television, and Internet transmissions. The Middle East was identified as a "global priority." [10] A follow-up review in February, 2001, reconfirmed that conclusion.

MERN was conceived in late 2000, around the time of and in response to the beginning of the present Palestinian uprising or "intifada" in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Of course, MERN's very purpose is to respond to and support U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Middle East.

Planning and funding for MERN intensified after the September 11 terrorist attacks. And, shortly after the attacks, the BBG "surged" or increased its short wave and medium wave radio broadcasts as well as live streamed ("real time") programming via the Internet to 21 countries in the Middle East, and South and Central Asia (including Afghanistan). (See Appendix F.) And, BBG sought additional funds in the President's supplemental budget request to increase its broadcast hours in Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Pashto, Urdu, and Uzbek.

Although BBG has responded to and supported U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Middle East to date, no one, including BBG, would argue that BBG's efforts have been effective. MERN's conception and implementation is a realization of the inadequacy of previous efforts.

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[10] *Broadcasting into the Millennium: Transmission Strategies and Outlook for the International Broadcasting Bureau* (IBB), August 1999, see pages 9-16.

BBG has acknowledged that its Arabic broadcasts "have been at the bottom tier of effectiveness." [11] By its own admission, BBG has been unable to meet its legislative mandate to reach effectively a substantial audience.[12] Only 1-2% of the target audience in the region acknowledges listening to BBG broadcasts. (See Appendix G.)

Furthermore, as noted above, on occasion BBG broadcasts have, at least in the opinion of some, not supported U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Middle East. The broadcast of former Taliban leader Omar, and that of the Egyptian terrorist cited above, are said by BBG's critics to have undercut American policy by providing a forum to our enemies.

In testimony before the House International Relations Committee in October 2001, the BBG Chairman acknowledged that mistakes were made as VOA quickly "ramped up coverage" after September 11. Noting that the controversial items ran for only minutes compared to the thousands of hours of annual VOA broadcasts, he reported that corrective actions had been taken. The journalists involved were reassigned. Also, new journalist reporting guidelines were developed. A Quality Control Group consisting of senior managers will now review "sensitive material." VOA, on a temporary basis, will also:

- increase "editorial control over stringer and correspondent reports;"
- double the airing of U.S. policy editorials;
- create an all news format for all services;
- increase analytical and background reports on terrorism and U.S. policy related topics;
- direct branch heads to exercise direct oversight of all programming, including correspondent reports and sensitive interviews; and
- seek to develop more consistency in VOA Dari, Pashto, Urdu, Uzbek, and Farsi language services.[13]

BBG further reports that it is now relying upon outside experts to help monitor radio broadcasts to eliminate any bias in reporting and better align itself with U.S. foreign policy goals.

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[11] Middle East Radio Network Performance Plan – FY 2003, p.2

[12] Middle East Radio Network Performance Plan, as cited.

[13] The intent of "consistency" is that the meaning and interpretation of editorials be as close to the original English as possible, regardless of the variations possible in some languages.

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CONCLUSIONS

Our overall evaluation of MERN is that it is a worthwhile and timely initiative that can advance U.S. foreign policy interests in the Middle East. Present efforts are having, at best, a limited impact on improving the Middle East's view of the United States and its foreign policy. [14]

Although MERN began broadcasting March 23, 2002, from its FM station in Amman, Jordan, for some period of time, it will continue to be a work in progress. It needs, then, to be considered a pilot project that can and will evolve over time. Because MERN is to be in a nascent stage for the foreseeable future, and because the reporting deadline imposed was tight, OIG intends to conduct a full-scale evaluation of MERN one year after its launch.

It is critical that the BBG meet its commitment to track the listening rate for its target audience and assess overall programming quality. OIG understands that the BBG will also evaluate the effectiveness of MERN broadcast transmissions by tracking signal strength as well as the number and type of FM affiliates. Verification and validation of performance measures will be provided by entities outside of BBG, to ensure objectivity. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) requires this kind of effort to assess the efficacy of government programs, and OIG applauds BBG for its agreement to apply GPRA principles to MERN. OIG's review next year will consider, among other things, the degree to which performance measures are met and validated.

OIG intends also to determine whether the BBG follows through on its commitment to introduce as much news and information, both about the United States and the targeted countries themselves, as quickly as possible after launch. The BBG's plan to start only with popular music programming, as a means to attract the predominantly young Arab and Muslim audience, makes sense to us, and credible research supports such an approach. But, a promising and unique opportunity to advance U.S. foreign policy interests in this volatile and vitally important region will

[14] Gallup Poll conducted December 2001-January 2002 in Muslim countries, as reported in the Baltimore Sun, March 21, 2002.

have been lost if MERN becomes only or even primarily a rock music station. Accordingly, BBG needs to adopt a written plan committing MERN to introducing as much news programming as possible as quickly as possible. OIG will assess the plan and MERN's compliance when a more thorough review is conducted next year.

Recommendation 3: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a plan to introduce as much news programming in Middle East Radio Network broadcasts as possible as quickly as possible.

BBG agrees with this recommendation and advises OIG that it intends to expand steadily the time devoted to news on MERN broadcasts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources of the Department of State should design and implement a plan to develop the internal language proficiency needed credibly to articulate American policies and viewpoints in Middle Eastern media outlets.

Recommendation 2: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a program, in coordination with the Department of State, to place public diplomacy advisers with the Middle East Radio Network at the disposition of the program director in Washington, D.C., and/or the director of the Middle East Programming Centre in Dubai.

Recommendation 3: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a plan to introduce as much news programming in Middle East Radio Network broadcasts as possible as quickly as possible.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBG	Broadcasting Board of Governors
FSO	Foreign Service Officer
GAO	General Accounting Office
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act
IBB	International Broadcasting Bureau
MBC	Middle East Broadcasting Centre
MEPC	Middle East Programming Center
MERN	Middle East Radio Network
NEA	Near Eastern Affairs
NSC	National Security Council
OCB	Office of Cuba Broadcasting
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
POLAD	Political Adviser
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
VOA	Voice of America

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JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER IV, WEST VIRGINIA

JESSE HELMS, NORTH CAROLINA
RICHARD G. LUGAR, INDIANA
CHUCK HAGEL, NEBRASKA
GORDON H. SMITH, OREGON
BILL FRIST, TENNESSEE
LINCOLN D. CHAFEE, RHODE ISLAND
GEORGE ALLEN, VIRGINIA
SAM BROWNBACK, KANSAS
MICHAEL B. ENZI, WYOMING

EDWARD W. KELLY, STAFF DIRECTOR
PATRICK A. MCNERNEY, REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

January 16, 2002

The Honorable Clark Kent Ervin
Inspector General
U.S. Department of State and Broadcasting Board of Governors
2201 C Street, NW
Room 6817
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Inspector General:

As one aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States is of course obligated to review its broadcasting policies and public diplomacy activities in the Middle East and throughout the Islamic world.

U.S. international broadcasting represents an important tool for public diplomacy. Our international broadcasting capabilities enable the United States to communicate its policy and thereby rebut the biased anti-American reporting of others.

Notwithstanding the General Accounting Office's having been called upon by the House International Relations Committee to evaluate the activities and effectiveness of U.S. non-military international broadcasting and public diplomacy, I will appreciate your formally requesting the Office of Inspector General to conduct a careful review of all broadcasting activities in the Middle East. (Needles to say, this will greatly assist congressional oversight.)

When the Broadcasting Board of Governors was created as an independent agency, part of the rationale was that it was never to be dominated by the Department of State. Sad to say, the recent presentation of an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Omar on the Voice of America (among other missteps) emphasized the risk that the U.S.-funded broadcasting facilities may be used as tools for broadcasting opinions not in the interest of the United States.

The Honorable Clark Kent Ervin
January 16, 2002
Page two

If the BBG-designed Middle East Radio Network (MERN) is to be a worthwhile initiative, these kinds of problems must be preempted. In light of that and other problems, I have substantial concern about the proposed structure of the MERN and its place, organizationally, within the BBG. I will therefore appreciate your conducting a two-fold study to ascertain whether:

(1) U.S. positions will be best presented through strong existing foreign commercial radio and television outlets in the Middle East media "marketplace,"
(2) BBG is capable of managing a project related to such sensitive U.S. policy interests without a far more careful review by the State Department and/or White House supervisory role;
(3) the VOA can effectively serve as the institutional home for a network melding both surrogate broadcasting and broadcasting about America;
(4) can a network remain consistent with U.S. interests if its personnel are resident nationals in Middle Eastern and other Muslim countries?; and
(5) can editorial control be realistically implemented from Washington?

One final point: I am persuaded that the BBG's role is limited solely to acting as a tool to expand the free flow of information and to promote U.S. policy, and not allowed to stray into policy formulation. Please review how the BBG -- as currently constituted -- has responded to, and supported, U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Middle East.

In order to assist in the consideration of priorities in the FY 2003 budget cycle, I will appreciate your making sure that report is achieved by March 15, 2002.

Sincerely,

Jesse Helms

JESSE HELMS: mpl

OFFICIALS AND KEY STAFF INTERVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT

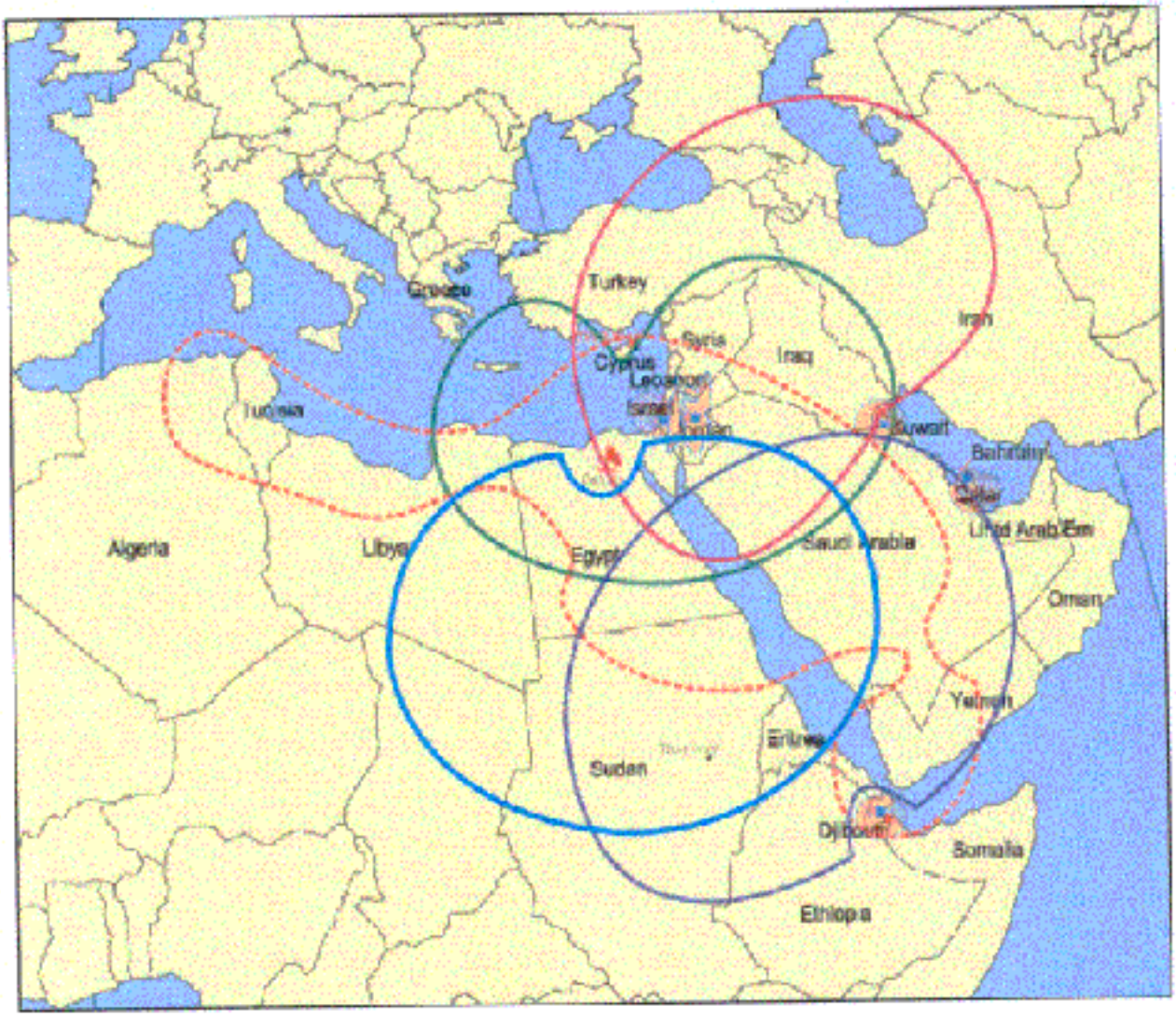
Entity	Interviewee
Broadcasting Board of Governors	Governor, MERN Committee Chair
	Congressional Coordinator, Congressional and External Affairs
	Legal Counsel
	Program Review Officer
International Broadcasting Bureau	Director
	Associate Director for Program Support
	Chief Financial Officer
	Director of Engineering and Technical Services
	Director of Security
Voice of America	Director
	Chief of Staff
	VOA News Division Director
	Assignments Chief, VOA News Division
	Near East and North Africa Division Director
	Arabic Branch Program Manager
	VOA Africa Staff
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty	President
	Counselor
	Director of Corporate Security
	Director of Broadcasting
	Director of Radio Free Iraq
Radio Free Asia	President
	Vice President, Editorial/Programming Department
	Human Resources Director
Department of State	Ambassador for Special Projects, Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs
	Senior Advisors to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs
	Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of State (NEA)
	Political Advisor Coordinator, Bureau of Political and Military Affairs
	Arabic Media Officer (NEA)
	Near East Programme Coordinator, U.S. Embassy-London
National Security Council	Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Democracy
	Director for Democracy
Office of Management and Budget	International Affairs Division
Congress	Staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
	Staff of the House International Relations Committee
British Broadcasting Corporation Arabic Service	Director
	Head of BBC Arabic Online
	Newsgathering and Current Affairs Director

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

	Percentage of Country's Population by Age		
Age Category	**<25**	**25-39**	**40+**
Algeria	58 %	22 %	20 %
Egypt	55	15	30
Gaza	69	17	14
Iraq	64	21	15
Jordan	59	24	17
Kuwait	48	28	25
Lebanon	50	26	24
Morocco	56	22	22
Oman	59	20	21
Qatar	42	23	35
Saudi Arabia	59	18	23
Syria	62	21	17
Tunisia	50	24	26
West Bank	64	20	16
For purposes of comparison			
United States	35	34	43
Russia	34	21	45
China	41	45	32

Source: BBG, *Reaching the Middle East: A New Broadcasting Opportunity*, p. 3.

PLANNED MERN TRANSMISSION SITES AND DELIVERY SYSTEMS



KEY

Solid Line	Medium Wave transmissions based in Cyprus, Kuwait, Djibouti and Egypt
Dotted Line	Nilesat Digital
Shaded	FM Coverage

Source: BBG, March 28, 2002.

(b)(2)

PROJECT SCHEDULE FROM FY 2003 MERN PERFORMANCE PLAN

(b)(5)

Source: BBG, March 14, 2002.

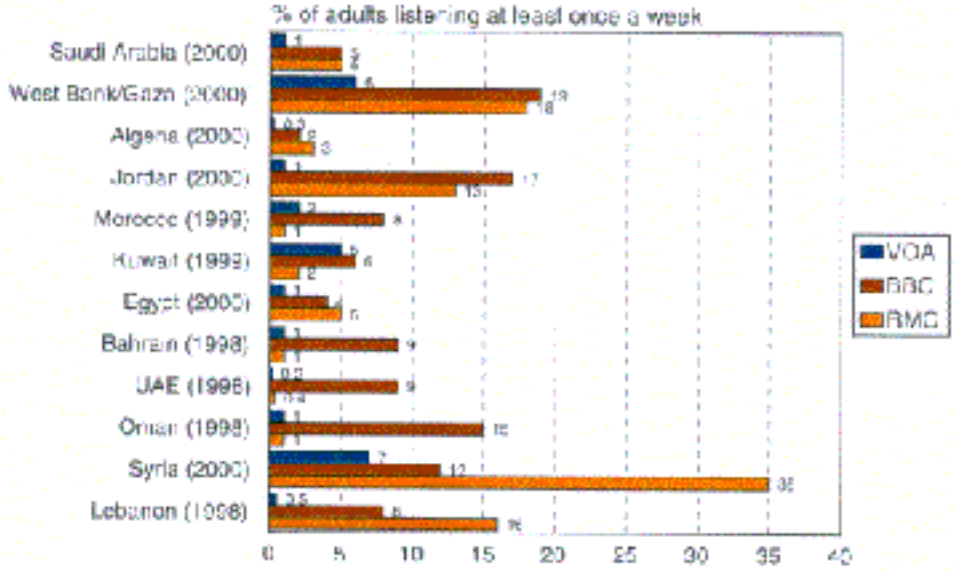
SURGE RESPONSE TO TERRORIST ATTACKS

	Total Pre-Attack Broadcast Hours	Total Surge to Date	Total Current Broadcast Hours	Requested Surge (Supp) Hours	Total Hours with Supp Request
VOA					
Dari	1.25	1	2.25	.75	3
Pashto	1.25	1	2.25	.75	3
Urdu	1.5	0.5	2	1	3
Farsi	3.5	1	4.5	1.5	6
Arabic	7	2	9	9	18
Uzbek	0.25	0.25	0.5	0.5	1
Turkish	0.5	0	0.5	0.5	1
Subtotal	**15.25**	**5.5**	**21**	**14**	**35**
RFE/RL					
Persian	9	0	9	3	12
Tajik	3	0	3	3	6
Uzbek	5	0	5	2	7
Turkmen	4	0	4	2	6
Arabic	8	0	8	4	12
Kazakh	6	0	6	2	8
Kyrgyz	3	0	3	2	5
Azeri	3	0	3	2	5
Subtotal	**41**	**0**	**41**	**20**	**61**
Total BBG	**56.25**	**5.5**	**62**	**34**	**96**

Source: BBG Radio Programming – Response to Terrorist Attack, November 2001.

Regular Listening to VOA, BBC, RMC

(Any Language, Latest Available Figures)



IBB Research

Broadcasting to the Arab World
June, 2001

BROADCASTING BOARD OF GOVERNORS
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

March 28, 2002

Mr. Clark Kent Ervin
Inspector General
Office of Inspector General
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Ervin:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the draft Inspector General report entitled "Survey of the Broadcasting Board of Governors' Middle East Broadcasting Activities and Initiatives." We heartily endorse your conclusions that recognize the Middle East Radio Network (MERN) as the best means of presenting U.S. positions to a substantial audience in the Middle East and that the BBG, IBB and Voice of America are fully capable of effectively implementing this ambitious initiative. You also recognized that we have responded aggressively to the events of September 11, 2001, by surging our broadcasting throughout the region. We are confident that MERN will become a successful vehicle for the advancement of U.S. interests in the Middle East and look forward to making that vision a reality.

While we are in agreement with many of your insights on the intent and potential for the MERN, we have serious reservations with your recommendation to place State Department "advisors" within MERN and the BBG (Recommendation #2). To do so would unquestionably violate the "firewall" established by the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994, place our organizational reputation for independent journalism at risk, and is, therefore, unacceptable. Our specific comments on your recommendations follow:

Recommendation 1: The Department should develop and implement a plan to develop the internal language proficiency needed credibly to articulate American policies and viewpoints in Middle Eastern media outlets.

BBG Response:

This recommendation is directed to the Department of State. However, the BBG agrees that the availability of language-proficient Department representatives would greatly enhance the effectiveness of their participation in news interviews and other programs employed by MERN and our other language services to accomplish our mission.

330 Independence Avenue, S.W. Room 3360 Cohen Bldg. Washington, DC 20237 (202) 401-3736 Fax (202) 401-6605

Recommendation 2: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a program, in coordination with the Department of State, to place public diplomacy advisors with the Middle East Radio Network at the disposition of the program director in Washington, D. C. and/or the director of the Middle East Programming Centre in Dubai.

BBG Response:

The BBG does not agree with this recommendation. The BBG believes that foreign policy advice is best provided in the manner specified in the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994, that is, through the Secretary of State, as a member of the Board of Governors. We welcome the full and regular participation of the Secretary or his designee in the deliberations of the Board. However, we strongly believe that the placement of political advisors within MERN would breach the firewall between broadcasters and policy makers.

Your report notes a "tension" between this agency's "professional independence and integrity" and its obligation to broadcast in a manner "consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States." In fact, we see nothing inconsistent about the two roles and, in many respects, see them as mutually reinforcing. "Professional independence and integrity" requires U.S. international broadcasting to follow the very highest standards of Western journalism. That requires rigid adherence to four principles: applying journalism - not political standards - in story selection; striving for truthfulness and accuracy; seeking balance and fairness; and reflecting diverse points of view. U.S. international broadcasting provides a yardstick by which domestic media in foreign countries can be compared. More importantly, it offers a clear, unfiltered window on current American foreign policy. There is simply no other medium in which this policy, along with up-to-the-minute news, can instantaneously and simultaneously be transmitted to so many citizens in such a critical area of the world. We believe this critical role is, in its essence, "consistent with the broad foreign policy objectives of the United States." While you propose that these political advisors "would have no editorial control", their formal presence in our news organization could not help but provide ammunition to the inevitable critics of MERN and call into question our bedrock commitment to credible, accepted journalistic standards. We simply cannot afford even the appearance that our journalism is skewed in any way. I'm sure you understand that MERN's journalistic reputation cannot be compromised or the entire project, indeed our entire operation, would be in jeopardy.

Moreover, your brief survey may not have noted the substantial, useful and regular communications that we have already developed with a variety of national security offices to ensure that our leaders are aware of current U.S. policy and to facilitate the success of MERN as well as our other broadcasts. The BBG is in regular contact with the Department of State's Office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and State's Bureau of Near East Affairs (NEA). The Director of MERN is in routine contact with Public Diplomacy officers in the NEA regarding opportunities for program placement within the region, and the senior leadership in the bureau has been briefed on key benchmarks involving MERN. Public Affairs Officers and Chiefs of Mission in the regional embassies have played crucial roles in gaining broadcast licenses

and/or frequencies in the region. The Director of the IBB keeps in close contact with the National Security Council (NSC), and the IBB's Office of Policy works daily with State to clear editorials expressing the policies of the United States Government.

In summary, the BBG supports the participation of the State Department in providing foreign policy advice as outlined in the U.S. International Broadcasting Act of 1994. This participation, coupled with the other routine, yet robust contacts with the State Department and the NSC, ensures the proper presentation of America's views. The presence of political advisors would portray MERN and the BBG as a propaganda arm of the U.S. and destroy the very effectiveness we are cooperatively trying to enhance. For these reasons, the Broadcasting Board of Governors feels that this recommendation is both unacceptable and unnecessary.

Recommendation 3: The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a plan to introduce as much news programming in Middle East Radio Network broadcasts as possible as quickly as possible.

BBG Response:

We agree with this recommendation and are in the process of implementing it. MERN music broadcasts began on March 23. We intend to introduce newscasts during selected hours beginning April 1. As personnel are selected and trained, we intend to steadily expand the time devoted to news. In addition to the regular news broadcasts, we intend to do more, adding specific policy components of the broadcasts as close to April 1 as possible. Regional news streams and other feature programming will be added as quickly as possible. At this writing, we have a request pending with the State Department to air a statement and, hopefully, conduct an interview with Secretary of State Powell as part of the "rollout" of MERN news. We also intend to apply for accreditation of MERN journalists with the White House, Congress, the State Department and the Pentagon, all in an effort to expand and improve coverage of U.S. policy.

Additional BGG Comments:

a. We note with concern the OIG comments that imply that the part-time nature of the Board of Governors might preclude the timely sharing of foreign policy information to working level broadcasters. The Executive Director of the BBG is in daily contact with the Chairman of the Board of Governors. Furthermore, the Board has established committees that meet frequently to examine issues relevant to their oversight, conference calls occur regularly, and electronic contact occurs almost daily amongst the Governors and BBG officials. Senior managers from throughout the organization participate in the Board meetings at which these foreign policy issues are discussed with the State Department representative and therefore obtain this first hand. State Department officials are regularly invited to participate in taped and live broadcasts to present U.S. foreign policy directly to our audience. This, coupled with the regular contacts with the State Department at multiple levels of the organization, ensures both adequate oversight and sharing of information.

UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY
AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON

March 29, 2002

Dear Clark:

Thank-you for reviewing the draft results of the OIG Survey of the Middle East Broadcast Network with me last week. You and your staff have a done a great job in a remarkably short time.

We have reviewed the draft report and your recommendations and have the following comments:

Recommendation 1. The Department should develop and implement a plan to develop the internal language proficiency needed to credibly articulate American policies and viewpoints in Middle Eastern media outlets.

Comment: As Under Secretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy and as the Secretary's representative to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, I strongly support this recommendation. Responsibility for its implementation, though, lies with the Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources. I believe that current programs are underway that would increase the intake of both Public Diplomacy and other State Officers into the service in a manner that will give us the ability to employ, train and retain officers with the needed language, political and personal skills for advancing U.S. policy goals in the Middle East.

Recommendation 2. The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a program in coordination with the Department of State to place public diplomacy advisors with the Middle East Radio Network at the disposition of the program director and/or the director of the Middle East programming Center in Dubai.

Comment: R fully concurs with this recommendation. However, given the nature of staff shortages, captured in Recommendation 1, this would not be possible in the near term future. We will, though, work with MERN, the BBG and the Department's Bureau for

Clark Kent Ervin
Inspector General
U.S. Department of State

Near East Affairs to ensure that there is a close, collegial working relationship between the MERN and the Department at the policy level.

Formal posting of "Political Advisors" to the MERN and other radio services is an attractive and potentially effective concept. I shall discuss this with the Director General's Office and other Department officials to see what might be possible. We would also have to discuss its implementation with the Board given its concern with possible "firewall" issues.

Recommendation 3. The Broadcasting Board of Governors should design and implement a plan to introduce as much news programming in MERN broadcasts as possible as quickly as possible.

As Under Secretary and the Secretary's Representative to the BBG, my office and I will work to accelerate the introduction of reasonable news, feature and editorial content as prescribed by the format to the MERN broadcast structure.

We also concur with the conclusions of the report in VOA's/MERN's ability to maintain policy and editorial control of MERN broadcasts and the difficulties faced in doing so. As we discussed with the BBG, we see the difficulties faced by the VOA earlier in the Global War on Terrorism to have been managerial in context and not "firewall" editorial issues. The new policies implemented at VOA, approved by the BBG and those proposed for the MERN will, if followed closely by management, forestall any repetition of these incidents.

We also concur with the OIG's proposal to carry out a further, in depth review of the MERN initiative after it has been in formal operation for one year.

MERN is one of the most creative and innovative initiatives taken by the United States to reach a crucial overseas audience in many years. The Department has supported it since its inception and we look forward to its successful implementation.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Walsh for

Charlotte L. Beers