

SPEAKERS

Mohamed Alami has been covering American politics for Arab audiences for over 15 years. He started his career with the Voice of America and has worked with the Associated Press, Arab News Network, and Abu Dhabi TV. Since 2000 he has been chief Washington correspondent with al-Jazeera and a columnist with the Moroccan Arabic daily *al-Ittihad al-Ishtiraki*.

Abdallah Schleifer is a veteran of both the American and Arab media and currently heads al-Arabiya's Washington Bureau. Prior to joining the network, he worked as a producer and reporter in Beirut and served as the Cairo Bureau Chief at NBC News. Schleifer is the founder and former director of the Adham Center for Television Journalism at the American University in Cairo, and was executive producer of the acclaimed documentary "Control Room." ■

GLOBAL VS. LOCAL: TELEVISION IN THE MAGHREB

While pan-Arab satellite television has transformed daily life and reshaped cultural identity throughout the Arab world, state-controlled local media in the Maghreb has been slow to adjust. Speaking at the CSIS Middle East Program's seventh Maghreb Roundtable, Abdallah Schleifer, Washington bureau chief at al-Arabiya, and Mohammed Alami, chief Washington correspondent for al-Jazeera, analyzed pan-Arab television's impact on the relationship between North African rulers and the local media outlets that they ultimately control. While the two experts disagreed on the extent to which pan-Arab satellite television is effecting changes within local media, both stressed that state media outlets must provide objective coverage of domestic news if they hope to regain influence with their people.

The cultural distinctness of the Maghreb has always colored its relationship with and role within regional media. As Schleifer explained, the origins of pan-Arab media can be traced back to *Jeune Afrique*, for which Schleifer was a correspondent in the late 1960s. He said at that time the Tunisian-run, Paris-based magazine was the most popular newsweekly in North Africa, and elites throughout the Arab world read it for news and analysis. It provided objective coverage of regional and international news, at the cost of avoiding criticism of Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba. In so doing, *Jeune Afrique* pioneered the notion of Arab journalistic freedom with the occasional blind spot, for which al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya are now famous.

Print continued to lead the way in the 1970s and 1980s, as the Arabic dailies *Asharq al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat* used their London premises to gain editorial independence, and used satellite-linked printing plants to distribute same-day papers throughout the Arab world. The rise of regional Arabic media helped loosen North Africa's old colonial bonds with Europe and tied the region more closely to the Arab world.

Schleifer estimated that the pan-Arab media's most important potential impact lies in what he calls "the marginal freedom thesis." Based on his own experience in Egypt, Schleifer sees liberalization that was originally limited to the economic sphere creating demands for greater openness and transparency. Promoting access to the Internet for economic reasons, for example, makes it harder for the Egyptian government to censor

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THE MAGHREB ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Maghreb Roundtable in November, 2005 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in North Africa and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Maghreb as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of North African energy, the effects of emigrant communities in Europe, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. ■

information, and the rise of satellite viewership means state television needs to produce a product that is competitive. Privately owned satellite stations based in Egypt had initially produced an innocuous stream of talk shows and cultural events, but during last year's parliamentary elections, they swiftly ventured into field reporting on violence at polling stations. Schleifer emphasized that the present level of journalistic freedom in Egypt was unthinkable just fifteen years ago, and stands as a testament to the influence of pan-Arab media.

Mohammed Alami noted many of the same trends, but he judged that pan-Arab television's impact on local media thus far has been largely cosmetic. Pointing to examples across North Africa, Alami said stations still feature much of the same

protocol news he remembers from his youth, using the linguistic formulas of the 1960s to describe a litany of meetings and speeches by heads of state. Alami pointed to a regression of journalistic freedom in Egypt after last autumn's parliamentary elections, and quickly dismissed Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria as devoid of any significant progress toward press freedom. He described

Morocco as the only bright spot in the region, and credited a domestic grassroots movement with creating an opening for expanded journalistic freedoms. Alami praised several Moroccan newsmagazines for pioneering critical discussions about previously taboo subjects, such as the Western Sahara and human rights within the kingdom. He pointed to Morocco's two state television channels as an example of further progress—while one channel focuses in a traditional manner on the daily activity of the monarch, the other has generated informative and engaging public affairs programming, for example intensely covering the national inquiry into human rights abuses under the late King Hassan II.

Schleifer and Alami agreed that there is plenty of room for local television to expand. Pan-Arab television often focuses on issues of broad interest, such as Iraq and the Palestinians, which squeezes out many local stories. Alami noted that the situation is particularly difficult in the Maghreb because the Libyan and Tunisian authorities do not allow al-Jazeera to maintain a permanent presence.

Both speakers recognized many of the shortcomings in pan-Arab television, noting that sometimes it was more inciting than insightful. Schleifer suggested that some of al-Jazeera's greatest sins are errors of omission rather than commission. Referring specifically to treatment of Shia and Kurdish view-

points, he criticized what appears to be a tone of "Sunni Arab supremacism" in the network's coverage.

Both speakers assessed that the popularity of pan-Arab news and the lack of strong, credible local coverage presents rulers in the Maghreb with an opportunity that should not be missed. Because channels such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya have so much autonomy from local governments, they have helped remove television from the protective arsenal of regional autocrats. As Alami explained, it is "the perception of objectivity" that makes pan-Arab news so popular. By providing honest coverage of local issues, state-run channels could win back domestic audiences and regain some of their influence over popular opinion, both men judged. Furthermore, they would fill the vacuum of local coverage that, as Schleifer emphasized, allow "outrageous rumors" to take hold. Pointing to the embarrassing delay with which Egyptian channels reported the April 2006 Dahab terrorist attacks, Alami highlighted the futility of ignoring unfavorable stories that people are certain to learn about from other networks. He further suggested that, with BBC Arabic and a new Russian pan-Arab outlet about to be launched, there will be increasing pressure on regimes to adapt to a more open world, or be completely left behind. ■ -NB 06/19/06

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