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Reality TV, Diplomacy Style

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The producers of the new Arab satellite show "On The Road In America" didn't set out to make just another reality TV show. With advisors like James Baker and Lee Hamilton, they were trying to win hearts and minds. We speak with producer and former Reagan aide Richard Fairbanks.

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BROOKE GLADSTONE: This week in The New York Times, a story on a new show called On the Road in America, now airing on an Arab satellite TV network called The Middle East Broadcasting Center, or MBC. Produced by Washington-based Layalina Productions, On the Road in America is a reality show that follows Arabs on an American cross-country adventure.

But it's also more than that. It's a campaign to win the hearts and minds of viewers in the Middle East and maybe someday here in the U.S., too, because Layalina Productions is not just your average TV production company. Its board includes George H. W. Bush, James Baker, Lee Hamilton, Brent Scowcroft and Henry Kissinger, a crew presumably more versed in foreign diplomacy than reality TV. But sometimes they are one and the same.

Richard Fairbanks, former Mideast peace negotiator during the Reagan Administration, is the founder of Layalina, and he joins us now. Ambassador, welcome back to On the Media.

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: Thank you very much.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Now, obviously this isn't just about being popular. You're a former Mideast peace negotiator during the Reagan Administration. I assume you see reality TV and foreign diplomacy converging in this project.

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: Well, certainly. We wouldn't have started the project if we didn't think we could have a positive impact on breaking down barriers and stimulating critical thinking in the Arab world about us and, conversely, since we're going to try to sell it back in the United States.

This reality show is only the first of many we've planned. For example, one member of our board of counselors, Don Hewitt, who was the inventor of 60 Minutes, is leaving for Dubai to look into setting up an equivalent of 60 Minutes, called The Hour in Arabic, that we would co-produce, again with NBC, to be shown on their all-news network called Al-Arabiya.

And we also have a scripted drama comedy series in the works, called How's Your Arabic? And we have a children's program called Ben and Izzy. So we have a variety of types of programs, all intended not to lecture, not to say, you stupid people out there, you ought to listen to us, but hopefully to have an impact for the better.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: We have seen, since 9/11, attempt after attempt by the government to create a more positive image of the United States in the Arab world, and they've all failed. What do you think went wrong there, and what do you think you're doing right?

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: Well, I can't say we're going to solve all the problems. But one problem the government has that we don't have is that they're the government, and people tend to say, oh, my goodness, that's government propaganda. I don't think that that's going to be able to reach as many people, and hopefully not as persuasively, as we can with a private sector initiative.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: You say much of the Arab world turns off American government media

because it has that official imprimatur. But let's face it, they're suspicious of the message also because, in many instances, the message feels phony.

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: Exactly right, but ours is not a message. And what we did was bring these three young Arab boys here, follow them around the country, let them interact with Americans from a variety of parts of the country and a variety of walks of life, and just recorded what they said, what they thought, what they heard and what their reactions were, and let that speak for themselves.

And so we are not proselytizing. We're just saying here are some things you haven't seen before, what do you think of that. And I think that kind of critical thinking can be very useful.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: But, of course, reality TV, the narrative is created through the editing. And I wonder whether sometimes the editors take a rather nervous knife to some of what these experiences are?

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: Well, actually, I think it's pretty representative of what they saw and talked about, etc. There was a quote in the newspaper the other day, saying, oh, my goodness, one of the young boys said something critical of the administration. Well, tough luck. That was what he said, and it's in there. And if we did some bowdlerized vision of cutting out anything that was negative about the United States, we would have the kind of show that people wouldn't want to watch.

I think we need to show the reality of what they saw. And there's a tremendous difference, interestingly enough, from what they were saying about the United States when they arrived to what they were saying after they'd been here for a couple of months of this filming and went back home. And I think that speaks for itself, and I think it will speak directly to the demographic that we're trying to reach out in the Arab world.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: What was that difference?

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: Well, what according to them it was, they arrived here saying, we don't like this country. We don't like your policies. People say it's just President Bush's fault, but you guys voted for him. And so this is the kind of country that we are not going to like, and we are predisposed to dislike Americans, as well as the country.

And by the end of it, they said, gosh, Americans were so nice to us out here. We can't decide whether it's because we're on this program or because Americans are really nice.

And so there was a tremendous change of view in the participants in the show as they went through it. One young Palestinian woman, who was part of the show for about half of it, said, I can't stand Israelis and I hate all Jews. And then she found out that the cameraman, who was following them around, was an Israeli. And by the end of the show, she and the cameraman were having long conversations. And, you know, she didn't say, I've now fallen in love with you and I want to move to Israel.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: [LAUGHS]

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: But, she said, I can't believe we can have a rational conversation, this is very different from what I thought it would be. So it's - again, it's not dictating to people, lecturing to people. It's letting the reality of a point of view they don't normally get present itself to them.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Thank you very much.

RICHARD FAIRBANKS: Thank you. It was wonderful to talk to you again.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Richard Fairbanks is the founder of Layalina Productions.