

New Reality TV Show Targets Arab Hearts and Minds

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Photo -- Layalina Productions

The U.S. government is spending millions of dollars annually trying to win the hearts and minds of the people of the Middle East. Critics of this public diplomacy campaign say the government is not getting its money's worth. Now, a non-profit U.S. media production company is getting into the game with a new reality TV show and other programs geared to Arab audiences. The producers hope to establish new lines of communication and dialogue with citizens and key opinion leaders throughout the Arab world.

This 12-episode half-hour semi-reality travelogue series features Arab students who discover the diversity and the uniqueness of the United States on their first visit to the country

privately-owned TV network based in Saudi Arabia.

The first effort by privately financed Layalina Productions is a 12-episode television series called *On the Road in America*, featuring three young Arab men and an Arab woman traveling together across the United states. The documentary-style show debuted on the Middle East Broadcasting Center, or MBC, a

"It is not only a journey to open their eyes -- they have never been to the U.S - (but) it is (also) a journey from which Arabs can see the Americans for who they are," says Mark Ginsberg, a former U.S Ambassador to Morocco and president of Layalina Productions, a non-profit company supported by individual, corporate and foundation donors.

Ginsberg believes *On the Road in America* is giving Arab audiences an entertaining but truthful look at America, and its people, through the eyes of four young Arabs. "They encounter all sorts of people along the way from politicians in Washington, to business leaders in New York, to cowboys in Montana and so on."

For the members of the *On the Road in America* cast, the cross-country journey was an unforgettable adventure. "Whenever you visit a country and make friends there, the next time you hear about the country, the first thing that is going to come up in my mind are these people," says Mohamed, a young man from Jordan.



Photo -- Layalina Productions



Ali, the young Egyptian cast member, says he also made a lot of American friends along the way. Those friendships, he says, have helped him shed many of the stereotyped notions of the United States, notions formed by



Hollywood's relentless depiction of America as a land of wealth and materialism.

Ali believes that his TV show makes an important contribution to American public diplomacy. "It is a very big chance to change the image of the U.S., because to be honest with you, after 9/11 and after what happened in Iraq and in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, most of the Arab people have a bad image of this country." He believes once the program airs on MBC that perception will change.

Ali is a cast member of the new TV reality show 'On the Road in America'

"At least, this show changed four Arabs," says another member of the cast, the young Palestinian woman named Lara. "So, I wish that everyone could just do this, without a show. "

But New York Times columnist Thomas Freidman says it will take more than clever TV shows to improve the U.S. image in the Middle East. "Telling our story is hugely important, but it is not sufficient, because there are two things that are, I think, more important than how we tell our story: how we conduct ourselves and what are our priorities."

Friedman says our actions would have a greater impact. "What if we just close Guantanamo bay? What if we said we are going to take down what has become the 'Anti-Statue of Liberty' because this no longer conforms to our values."

Friedman, a Middle East expert, says no amount of "spin" to promote U.S. policies, he says, will change America's image in the the Middle East.

Former Ambassador-at-Large Richard Fairbanks, now Layalina's Chairman of the Board, observes that America's message must also be presented where the intended audience will see it. He says the Saudi-based MBC is one of the most-watched TV networks in the Middle East, making it a much more effective platform than the U.S. government-funded Al Hurra TV. "Because unfortunately, not many people watch Al Hurra. They are tired of governments, whether it is our U.S government or their own governments, providing their video outlets"

Fairbanks says the channels that people tune into in the Middle East are privately-owned channels. "And so we are going on the private channels that people actually watch voluntarily."

Ambassador Fairbanks says Layalina Productions intends to play a continuing role in that effort. It is developing other English- and Arabic-language programs, including an animated children show, a sister cities program and a current affairs TV-talk show that features columnist Thomas Freidman and an Arab-American journalist debating some of the major issues in U.S.-Arab affairs.

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