

**MEETING OF TELEVISION PROFESSIONALS
TO PROMOTE DIALOGUE AND TO ENCOURAGE COOPERATIVE ACTION
ON THE MIDDLE EAST**

**Report of a conference organized by Search for Common Ground
with support from the Hollings Center
in Istanbul, Turkey
February 3-5, 2006**

“We as journalists are part of this conflict. We try not to be.... We try for objectivity, but I don’t think we’ve been successful.” – Correspondent for Arab Satellite Station

“The problem we have before us is not language or reporting; it is the problem of conflicting narratives... We don’t listen to each other; we don’t absorb each other’s story.... We have to meet somewhere on the road and strike a compromise.” – Israeli Anchor

“This is a problem of a dialogue between two deaf people.” – Palestinian Independent TV Executive

“It’s very important that tomorrow I will have friends from Palestinian TV and the Gulf. We are all doing the same news daily.” – Israeli Television Executive

BACKGROUND

The media's traditional approach to controversial and sensitive issues is to explore the extent and range of disagreement, but this rarely results in common understanding or provides a solution to a problem. In fact, the media often seems to exploit a contentious issue for its entertainment value, sometimes leaving readers and audiences with the impression that nothing positive can be achieved and that the extremes of opinion being presented are representative of the majority.

In contrast, Common Ground methodologies encourage the exploration of possible areas of agreement between opposing sides of a discussion, try actively to subvert prejudices and stereotyping, to promote the dignity of all sides, and to encourage a positive vision. This approach works well for sensitive political issues, as it does in situations of violent armed conflict.

Since 1987, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has produced electronic and print programming to help resolve and prevent conflict. We have developed numerous methodologies to break down the prejudice and fear that are at the root of divisive conflict. Our basic premise is that virtually all formats can be adapted to promote tolerance and non-violent conflict resolution. Here is a list of the techniques we have used: Radio and TV Talk Shows, Radio Soap Opera, TV Documentaries, TV Drama, Radio Studios, Children's TV, Music Videos, News Services, Multi-Ethnic Magazines, Journalist Training, Cross-Ethnic Team Reporting, and Cross-Ethnic Meetings among Journalists.

OVERVIEW

Since 1994, SFCG has convened 14 meetings of journalists who cover the Middle East conflict. Participants in these meetings have been mostly newspaper reporters, editors and publishers. From February 3-5 in Istanbul, we held the *first such meeting solely for television professionals*, including 22 Egyptian, Palestinian, Gulf, Israeli, Jordanian, Turkish, British and American participants.

Funding for the meeting was generously provided by the new Center for Middle Eastern-Western Dialogue, known informally as the Hollings Center in recognition of the key role of retired U.S. Senator Ernest Hollings (D-South Carolina) in its formation. In 2004 and 2005 Congress passed legislation to establish the Center as a forum for dialogue, debate and conflict resolution and to promote intercultural and international understanding between the West and the Muslim world and within the Muslim world. The Center's programs all take place in Istanbul.

The meeting featured thought-provoking discussion on current TV developments, trends and challenges. There was a consensus that everyone could do better in communicating; but that, unfortunately, finding common ground has become even more difficult in the current political climate.

GOALS

The goals of the meeting were:

- To promote dialogue and cooperation among key television professionals
- To discuss developments, challenges, and trends in regional TV
- To explore specific ways that TV can help promote peace and understanding in the region
- To catalyze concrete actions – to make things happen

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

An important part of the meeting was spent on educating and discussing the current landscape of the various television environments represented. These updates included developments, trends and challenges that exist within each category. There was not consensus on everything said, which made for a richer discussion and learning process. This piece of the meeting also provided a realistic and common basis for participants to later discuss viable project ideas.

The **Palestinian television** environment has changed over the past years. Language such as “Zionist Enemy” has decreased and some participants of the meeting doubted that advancements since 1994 would be reversed. Others believe that with Hamas’ victory in recent parliamentary elections, there will be changes and constraints placed on Palestinian television. One participant emphasized that the majority of Palestinians believe in peace and TV will reflect this.

An Israeli serving as an Arab analyst noted that official Palestinian TV has failed to capture the Palestinian audience. People compare it to what they see on Abu Dhabi. The presence of Hamas on Palestinian broadcasting has already increased. Hamas is not in a hurry to have their own Palestinian TV station because they already have access to the big stations such as Al Arabiyya. In the future, Hamas can go to the Iranians, who are already running three Arabic-satellite stations outside Iran. Hamas is exploring these options – it is mainly a financial issue. However, there is an unwillingness to get too close to the Iranians.

Israeli television has also seen a change in rhetoric over the last few years. For example, the word “occupation” used to be taboo and now it is frequently heard on Israeli television. However, Israel has allowed itself to remain without a voice in Arabic. There was an attempt to have a satellite station in Arabic but it failed. They do not broadcast to the Arab world. There will be one channel on the cable system, but according to one participant, it will be withdrawn. “This is one of the most serious defects that you can find in the Israeli system today,” said one Israeli Anchor. Another participant stated that Israel has given up on talking and listening to the Arab world. Most Israeli journalists do not speak Arabic. Also, Israeli television, partially for budgetary reasons, does not send correspondents to be based in the Arab world. A Palestinian professional raised the idea

that Israelis do not accept the news from Arab stations. However, an Israeli in charge of news stated that he is criticized for putting so many Palestinians on the air and emphasized that Israeli channels do give voice to Palestinians.

Pan-Arab television was described as being divided into two groups. The first group are government-controlled stations that censor external coverage out of fear that it could damage their relations with other states. The second group tends to report only on external news but avoids covering local issues. The extent to which the latter can cover external affairs is a reflection of how “clean” the local regime is. In general, there is a trend to move away from hard news coverage and more towards features. Pan-Arab stations such as MBC, Abu Dhabi, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyya cannot be compared to local or governmental stations in the Arab world because the former are broadcast 24 hours a day. An Israeli correspondent noted, “The region is changing because of TV. It can turn the world upside-down. A small country like Qatar can become an empire because of TV.”

An Egyptian participant stated that public and private **Egyptian television** is still sponsored by the government or by wealthy individuals. This structure has a negative impact on common ground and on the peace process. Arab stations address the state’s ruler or the station’s owner. The Ministry of Information also has tight controls on television. The participant stated a need for more independence, economically and politically.

The discussion on **international television** illuminated where the direction of mass media may be leading viewers and vice versa. There was general agreement that television will move to condensed coverage broadcasts over the internet or via mobile phone technology. User-generated news is also a trend whereby photographs and video clips, many taken on mobile phones, have gained and will increasingly gain popular placements on television. There are now 1-minute dramas being produced to watch over the phone. TV will need to adopt just as newspapers went from breaking news to feature stories and radio went from soap operas to music. Participants encouraged one another to think about how to appropriately adapt TV. An Israeli participant added that he is increasingly looking to use internet and phone technology but that the content of the coverage remains the same. Participants also raised the question of interest among international viewers regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lastly, one participant noted that while local news stations cannot call their own society members terrorists, international media can and it plays a role as a voice of a third party.

The group also heard a presentation from a **Turkish television** professional who spoke about his involvement in a Turkish-Greek media working group that met annually. The journalists involved realized that the media had been a culprit for perpetuating the conflict between Turkey and Greece. They got together “not to talk about the sins of the other, but the sins of themselves.” They also decided to contact each other when things seemed to be “blowing up” in order to gather reports that were more neutral. Currently, the most popular show on Turkish TV (also airing in Greece with subtitles) is about a Turkish girl who married a Greek boy. The show makes fun of the prejudices both sides

have towards the other. His conclusions gave some hope to the group as to the effect they can have on the conflict.

CONCRETE ACTION

Participants spent much of the conference discussing specific actions that they could take, either acting on their own or working together. It was noted that a certain degree of cooperation already exists, in terms of sharing facilities, feeds, footage and information.

There was general agreement that *cooperation should be based on shared professional interests*. Because competing stations were present, participants at times avoided talking about certain ideas in the meetings themselves and used private conversations in the corridors and at meals to try to facilitate deals.

The list of possible action that follows does not include all that was proposed or discussed, but only those items that can reasonably be expected to be implemented by participants acting on their own and/or in cooperation with Search for Common Ground.

1. **Programming to increase mutual understanding.** Participants agreed on the need to dig deeper into stories and to humanize the other. Here are some examples:

- a. An Arab satellite broadcaster is planning to produce a series called *Know Your Enemy/Partner* on how Israelis regard Palestinians and *vice versa*. Israelis participants expressed interest in being involved

“We’re trying to do something new.... It can improve the climate and help find common ground.” – Arab Satellite Correspondent

- b. Another Arab satellite broadcaster is planning a series on life inside Israel that would explain such things as how the Knesset works and what is the role of the Israeli military. It was suggested that Israeli journalists could supply background and footage.
- c. An Israeli anchor is producing a multi-part series on Israel’s Arab population. He needs financial support for what he sees as a breakthrough series, and he was provided with leads and contacts for possible sources of funding.
- d. Programs might be produced with such themes as 1) *What would be a normal life be?* and 2) *What is your vision of the future?* and 3) *The right to dream.*
- e. Palestinian independent TV has a popular nightly news program that shows Israeli news broadcasts, with a voice-over in Arabic. It was

suggested that Israeli TV stations could run similar programming and that the Israelis could produce news pieces about the Palestinian program.

“We have to go a few layers deeper and show empathy to both sides of the conflict – and go to the mother behind her screams and see her crying for her son.” – Israeli Anchor

“We have to ask the hard questions and we haven’t done this yet. We hear our leaders tell lies and we tell these lies to our audience....We have to be hard on our own politicians.” – Independent Palestinian Television Executive

- 2. Cooperation between Journalists.** As a result of this meeting, participants now have each other’s phone numbers and email addresses, and they agreed to stay in touch. Furthermore, an Israeli news director and an Arab satellite reporter volunteered to send all participants a list of Israelis and Palestinians who speak the other language and who are good interview subjects. Lastly, it was suggested that individual Israeli and Arab reporters might, on occasion, cover the same story from their own perspective and that their reports could be aired together.

“We have a vision which says that you have to understand even what your enemy says.” – Palestinian Independent TV Executive

- 3. Broadcast Space on the Israeli Cable for Palestinian TV.** An Israeli participant stated that a commercial Israeli cable operator would be interested in receiving Palestinian programming that would be of interest to Israeli-Arab cable subscribers. He further suggested that this could be a source of both additional viewers and revenue to Palestinian TV.
- 4. New Formats.** Israeli and Western participants agreed that TV seems to be a declining medium and that interest in the conflict is decreasing as commercial considerations become ever more important and new technologies involving the internet and cell phones become more prevalent. It was suggested that Common Ground Productions should produce video news releases and a web-based version of the Common Ground News Service, which would offer specific programming for the new media. It was also suggested that a satellite broadcaster like Link TV could be used to air films from both sides.

“Israelis don’t want to listen any more. They have heard enough....News has the lowest possible ratings.” – Israeli correspondent on Arab affairs

“Television is a dinosaur.” – US Network Correspondent

- 5. Future Meetings.** There was a consensus that additional Middle Eastern media meetings should be held, including:

- a. SFCG and the Center for Middle Eastern-Western Dialogue (Hollings Center) should convene, once a year, follow-up meetings for TV professionals.

“It would be useful to meet again.” – US Network Correspondent

“My expectations were high, and you have met them.” – Israeli News Director

- a. There were requests for SFCG’s Jerusalem office to bring together Palestinian and Israeli participants for subsequent local meetings, to arrange reciprocal visits of Palestinians and Israelis to the others’ stations, and to issue regular updates on the activities of participants.
- b. Participants noted that it is getting increasingly difficult to get viewers to watch news and documentaries, and that entertainment, drama, and reality shows may well be a more effective way to reach viewers. It was proposed that a future meeting be convened for creative producers, directors and writers to come up with specific projects.

“The Israel-Palestinian conflict is based on emotion and opinions. A key factor to change is reframing – to take the clichés and everything we’re used to and see whether we’ll be able to do it in a creative, different way that speaks to the best of TV, the core of the conflict, the guts, the heart, and not the mind....Soap opera and entertainment is more important than news in changing attitudes.” – Head of Israeli Production Company

- c. The John F. Kennedy Library in Boston will sponsor one or more meeting to bring together Middle East key media personalities.

6. **Common Ground Productions.** CGP should continue to act as a facilitating third party to carry out productions involving Palestinian and Israelis. We also could produce video news releases and be a clearinghouse for programmatic and footage exchanges.

“People with poor ideas are coming to power and campaigning. This is a time when we must think about how can we bridge the gap – Egyptian Television Executive

“TV can raise barriers, but it can also break them down.” – Israeli Anchor