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American Road Trip Through Arab Eyes

by Jacques Steinberg

“On the Road in America” looks, on first viewing, like the sort of television show that Al Jazeera and MTV might produce if they could be coaxed together in front of an editing terminal. A 12-part reality series, currently being broadcast throughout the Middle East, “On the Road” features a caravan of young, good-looking Arabs crisscrossing America on a mission to educate themselves and the people they encounter along the way.

In reality, its list of production credits reads more like the roster of the Iraq Study Group that reported its findings to President Bush in December. The co-chairmen of that bipartisan effort - James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton - are on the board of advisers of Layalina Productions, the nonprofit (and nonpartisan) group that made “On the Road in America” and licensed it to Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), an Arab satellite TV network. (MBC is the parent company of Al Arabiya, a news channel that is a rival of Al Jazeera.)

Also on the advisory panel of Layalina are a former president, George H. W. Bush (listed as honorary chairman of what is officially its board of counselors), and nearly a dozen prominent members of his and other administrations, both Republican and Democratic, including Henry A. Kissinger, George P. Shultz, Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Samuel R. Berger and Lawrence S. Eagleburger. (Also on the panel is Don Hewitt, the founder and longtime executive producer of “60 Minutes,” who helped edit the pilot of “On the Road in America.”)

This unlikely coalition of unpaid consultants - whose principal role was to raise money and to knock on diplomatic doors - has helped create a series primarily intended to reintroduce America to the Arab world through the eyes of three students (from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon) and a Palestinian woman who serves both as a production assistant and translator.

(The show can currently be seen only in the Middle East, though its producers are seeking an American distributor.)

Implicit in the series’s mission, if not spoken aloud, is a desire to correct whatever damage has been done to America’s standing in the Middle East by the Iraq war and the nearly four-year American military presence in that country. But the production, financed mostly through foundations and without government help, also seeks to counter the image of America often conveyed to the Arab world via Hollywood: that of an arrogant, self-absorbed, bellicose nation.

“What appealed to me about this project,” said Dr. Brzezinski, who was national security adviser in the Carter administration, “is that it seemed to be addressed to a real need, namely conveying somehow the reality of American life - its diversity, its fundamental tolerance, the kind of thing that is not always understood abroad, either by admirers or detractors of America.”

Asked why he had chosen to align himself with the project, Mr. Shultz, who served as secretary of state in the Reagan administration, said: “One of the things we need to learn how to do much better is communicate with the world of Islam. We are, at this time, amateurish.”

Marc C. Ginsberg, the president of Layalina and an ambassador to Morocco during the Carter administration, said he wanted “On the Road” to be a “warts and all” portrayal of both sides of the divide between the West and the Middle East, to say nothing of the factions within the Middle East itself.

In the first episode - set in Washington and broadcast on MBC on Jan. 18 - Ali Amr, 22, an Egyptian accounting student, discusses his initial impressions of the American people. “You will tell me they are not responsible for Bush’s policies,” he says, “and I will tell you that they are the ones who elected Bush, correct or not?”

This particular clip, in Arabic, was not included in the six-minute highlight reel sent to Layalina’s board of advisers, including the first President Bush. But Mr. Ginsberg said that Mr. Bush and the other advisers were made aware that the production might contain criticism of the American government.

“We had no intention of offending him,” Mr. Ginsberg said of Mr. Bush. “But we don’t want to edit the comments of the stars of these shows.”

Reached on Monday, a spokesman for the former president said he had no comment. Mr. Ginsberg said he had sent a copy of the same highlight reel to an aide to Karen Hughes, a close adviser to George W. Bush currently serving as an undersecretary of state. “They want us to come over and do a briefing at the State Department,” Mr. Ginsberg said.

Far more bracing than the participants’ occasional comments about the current president, though, is the frank discussion throughout the series’s first two episodes - the second takes the participants from Washington to New York City - about the long-frayed relations between Israel and many of its Arab neighbors.

“Israelis, I hate Israelis,” Lara Abou Saifan, the series’s production assistant, a Palestinian from Lebanon, says in Arabic after a radio news report of Israeli bombing of her country last summer. But this being an American-made series - its creator and executive producer, Jerome Gary, produced the documentary “Pumping Iron” (1977) - Ms. Abou Saifan quickly (within the span of that 24-

minute episode) comes to temper her views, mainly through a back-and-forth with a cameraman, Guy Livneh, who turns out to be Israeli.

“You know, the Arab world thinks that Israel wants to conquer the Middle East,” he says inside the production van. “That’s absurd, you know.”

Later Ms. Abou Saifan tells Mr. Livneh: “I never, never, never, never imagined that I’d have this conversation with someone like you.”

Layalina was founded by Richard Fairbanks, a Mideast peace negotiator during the Reagan administration, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorism attacks, with the hope of using mass media to help soothe the rage on all sides. Mr. Fairbanks’s foundation is also among the chief benefactors of “On the Road in America.” At about \$1.8 million, the series’s budget is relatively cheap by Hollywood standards, considering that the production hopscotched across America last summer, with stops in the Mississippi Delta for a lesson on poverty, Montana (hiking with cowgirls), as well as Washington (singing with a gospel choir and campaigning for mayoral candidates) and New York (visiting a bond trader and ground zero). In the final episodes Americans accompany the four back to the Middle East.

The producers are also moving ahead on several other projects aimed at an Arab audience. One is a situation comedy - the working title is “How’s Your Arabic?” - about an Arab-American trying to teach Arabic to immigrants and F.B.I. agents at an American university. Another project is a one-hour, weekly news magazine that MBC is considering. Its working title is “Al Saat,” which roughly translates to “One Hour,” a name that is hardly surprising, considering Mr. Hewitt’s role as a consultant. MBC executives say it is too early to know how much of the prime-time audience of its main channel, MBC 1 - typically about 21 million viewers, including in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq - has tuned in for the first two episodes of “On the Road.”

But Mazen Hayek, group director of broadcasting for MBC, said MBC was immensely proud of its association with the project.

“The most important thing in this series,” he said in a telephone interview from MBC’s headquarters in Dubai, “is that it will help us overcome existing stereotypes among Americans and Arabs, through the interaction of the talent, and through the viewers seeing how the Americans dealt with those guys.”

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