

**Matt Sienkiewicz.** *The Other Air Force: U.S. Efforts to Reshape Middle Eastern Media since 9/11.* New York: Rutgers University Press, 2016. 192 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-7798-2.

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As an airpower instructor, I could not resist reading Matt Sienkiewicz's *The Other Air Force: U.S. Efforts to Reshape Middle Eastern Media since 9/11* for the different type of "air power" it details. Sienkiewicz highlights the United States' "soft psy" media approach since 9/11, which is a significant departure from its more tailored and controlled Cold War messaging. The attacks of 9/11 threw a cold bucket of water on US media strategy. Clearly the United States had not convinced the Middle East to "like" it. As a result, its leaders decided it would no longer dominate the airwaves with its own messaging. Rather, it would fund indigenous companies, which has provided those entrepreneurs with a great deal of agency even as they have had to acquire local advertising for sustenance.

There are compelling reasons to read this book given the recent gutting of the diplomatic instrument of power. For military historians, the work's focus on soft power raises the question of how well the military might undertake this mission. This is even more likely given the rising importance of information warfare, not only because of the nexus between cyber and information war but because it can be a potentially asymmetric weapon.

Sienkiewicz offers insights into information warfare from his perspective as an assistant pro-

fessor of communication and international studies at Boston University. Equally helpful is his experience in creating media himself, having made multiple documentaries, some of them both in and about the Middle East. Sienkiewicz strikes a reasonably even keel in his approach; he is neither an apologist for George W. Bush nor an emulator of Noam Chomsky, whom he critiques for his tendency to bifurcate the world too simplistically into the powerful and the powerless.

For those more familiar with top-down forms of soft power used during the Cold War such as the Voice of America, what this work details might be surprising. 9/11 destroyed any illusions regarding the efficacy of US media strategy. As a result, the Bush administration crafted a new approach that rested on neoliberal assumptions about capitalism. The theory was that capitalism worked and thus the United States could marry it to its cultural media power so that viewers' opinions of it improved in the Middle East.

America began funding for-profit radio and television stations and then largely left them alone once they were self-sustaining. In other words, the United States has acted as a venture capitalist, except that it did not expect its loan to be repaid financially. This process depends on local agency, requiring media to sell itself to local populations by attracting investment and support,

such as by getting the buy-in of indigenous advertisers. The author labels this approach “soft psy media” (p. 8), which rests somewhere in the middle of a continuum, with the more militaristic psychological approach at one end and the soft side at the other. The latter receives most of the attention in this work.

Despite changes in funding, this strategy rests on the same assumptions that policymakers projected onto the Middle East during the Cold War in accepting Daniel Lerner’s pathbreaking division of Middle Eastern society. He demarcated between traditionalists—who purportedly held onto religion rather than embracing modernity—and grocers, who were understood to be eager to embrace capitalism and secularism as part of a broader modernity. American architects largely employ an updated version of this construction in which the grocer is now a consumer. Rather than sell, the targeted Middle Easterner is happy to participate in capitalism as a buyer.

While the ultimate effectiveness of this investment may be more dubious than the author allows for, it is arguably more successful than its Cold War predecessors. Serious blowback resulted when listeners in Iran and elsewhere discovered that the US actively was shaping the messages they were hearing, particularly after the Islamic Revolution of 1978. Now, US influence is far more overt. The paradox, though, is that the United States has far less control over the message, which comes across as a kind of vague pro-capitalist narrative.

Sienkiewicz’s work can be distilled into two cases studies: Afghanistan, where he spent five weeks in 2013, and Palestine, where he spent sixteen months. He also interviewed an array of American and European actors. *The Other Air Force* does not seek to survey the Middle East as a whole; in that way, the title is somewhat misleading. Yet neither is it meant to be a detailed ethnography because the author could not remain as long in Afghanistan as he did in Palestine. The

work therefore ends up being a thoughtful compilation of various Afghan and Palestinian men and women who have received funds to create various forms of media. That is the strength of the book and, indeed, perhaps its unique historiographical contribution.

US efforts are largely a secondary focus. Similarly, because his foremost concern is with those local agents and how they are creating media, there is little sense of how individuals have absorbed or rejected this media or how the United States formulated this media strategy in the first place. An oddly misplaced final chapter attempts to tackle this question by ascertaining the impact of the meta-media that has flooded US media after a shift from vertical to more horizontal forms of media hierarchy in which “circulation” now trumps “distribution.” For example, Middle Eastern sound bites and video clips can be selectively chosen and presented in ways that reinforce Western stereotypes of the Middle East. But because we tend to see them as primary sources, we give them more credence. The best example of this is Al Jazeera’s airing of an Obama Bin Laden clip celebrating the 9/11 attacks. Sienkiewicz argues that this meta-media subtly yet powerfully influenced the mind-set of policymakers

Although the book is focused on Palestine and Afghanistan, Sienkiewicz provides important insights into Iraq as well. After the US government shut down the Voice of America Arabic after 9/11 on the grounds that America had a public relations problem in the Middle East, it began to support new, indigenous radio stations in accordance with the soft-psy model. This did not go well during and after the invasion of Iraq. The United States quickly transitioned from waging psychological war from an EC-130 aircraft blaring pop music interspersed with short news pieces to a softer approach. In that time of transition, it lost control of the narrative as a variety of indigenous newspapers flooded the new open market. A fail-

ure to identify the right indigenous actors to implement its vision only compounded the problem.

In Afghanistan, by contrast, there has been a cultural broadcasting war. In a knock-off of 24 called *Eagle 4*, the hero works to keep Kabul's citizens safe. In essence, the show seeks to reassure viewers that the government "works." However, Sienkiewicz characterizes this particular show as more at the psy end of the soft-psy spectrum. Other examples approaching the soft side are often analyzed through the lens of thinkers like Homi Bhabha. While this helps to reveal the agency of local actors (which has limits nonetheless), it does suggest this media strategy could be a colossal waste of money, a point the author skirts until the work's end.

The work begins with the statement that "America is not a subtle nation" (p. 1). If the US military does dictate more of the nation's media strategy, it will likely continue to find itself uncomfortable with giving up full control of the message it seeks to convey. This, however, runs the risk of making the United States unable to compete in "increasingly congested media spheres" (p. 6). In its current form, Sienkiewicz argues, US media strategy is nothing more than "band-aids on bullet holes" (p. 165). In other words, the nation's "other" air force is largely hollow. As he suggests in the work's last two pages, however, America does not have a communications problem; it has a power problem. Palestinian and Afghan versions of *The Apprentice* will not solve this anytime soon. Voting for one's favorite contestant on a reality TV show is a poor substitute for meaningful change.

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