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Mullen: Friendly airwaves link Iraq to Utah

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Dear friends in Utah: Another beautiful morning in Baghdad weather-wise and a violent one otherwise. More innocent people are killed. Two sisters were assassinated by Shia militia because their father works with the Americans. I am sorry to start with bad news but I promise I will end with something good. Women activists are still working hard, meeting with other women and with the key people at the political level to smooth the way for more females to join the political process. The extremists are reluctant but we will keep pushing and demanding until we get what we want. Thank you, with love from Iraq, Al-Mahaba radio station, March 29, 2006.

Bushra Jamil sent that e-mail to musician and Salt Lake radio show host Kurt Bestor. Jamil is the spokeswoman for Radio Al-Mahaba, Baghdad's "Voice of Iraqi Women." It is the country's only secular and independent radio station for and about women. By Jamil's description, the station is largely educational, and fueled with a passion to teach women their legal rights in a country rocked by constant violence and uncertainty.

The station struggles financially, but Jamil assures Bestor and many other Utah friends that no one suffers lack of heart for their work. That energy has linked the women of Iraq and Utah in a unique, if circuitous, way.

Debbie Bowers of Buffalo, N.Y., founded Radio Al-Mahaba with an Iraqi refugee who settled in New York after the 1991 Gulf War. Bowers eventually gained a \$350,000 grant from the U.N. Development Grant for women to seed the station. Radio Al-Mahaba took to the air a little more than a year ago. Last October, a bomb destroyed the station's transmitter; since then, the management has been leasing a transmitter at outrageously inflated prices, Jamil reports.

The Utah connection has grown swiftly. Salt Lake resident Ako Swabb learned of Radio Al-Mahaba through her son, who was a Marine in Fallujah. Swabb began a friendship with Jamil by e-mail and telephone.

Swabb also connected with Womenade, a group of Utahns that raises money to aid women in gaining education and independence - such as college tuition, financing dental work or child-care expenses.

Womenade has agreed to put money toward a new transmitter for Radio Al-Mahaba. Jamil will visit Salt Lake City next week, and will speak at the Salt Lake City Main Library and the University of Utah's Women's Resource Center and Hinckley Institute of Politics.

Bestor, co-host of a morning talk show on KUTR-AM 820, has convinced the station's parent company, Bonneville International, to forge an alliance with Radio Al-Mahaba. Like the Baghdad station, KUTR offers 24-hour programming for and about women, one of only three such commercial radio stations in the United

States.

Known for his prolific holiday musical compositions, Bestor is currently composing the music for the state's "Life Elevated" tourism ad campaign.

When he heard through the community grapevine of Radio Al-Mahaba, he felt he finally had a chance to make some sense of the war and general unrest in the Middle East.

"Working at AM 820 has given me the opportunity to see how effectively women work to reach a goal," Bestor said during a break at a downtown coffee bistro. "Thanks to the men in the White House and the war room, the solutions to the world's problems are about aggression. You know, hit your enemy with a stick, and if they don't comply, hit them harder.

"Typically, when women work to attack a problem, they do it in a communal way. They have a lot less ego and they get a lot more positive results."

So it is with the women contributing to the future of Radio Al-Mahaba. The transmitter will cost about \$50,000, so the challenge is daunting.

A fundraiser at Salt Lake's Seago Gallery brought in more than \$5,000.

The 100 or so women expected at an April 26 quarterly Womenade meeting are each asked to donate \$35 toward the cause.

But the focus is on possibility. Bestor sees the sister-station partnership developing into on-air exchanges between Iraqi and Utah women, a Web site link and "virtual" pen pal relationships.

"This effort," he said, "is devoid of politics. It's devoid of everything but heart."

For more information about Radio Al-Mahaba and Bushra Jamil's Salt Lake City visit, go to <http://www.utaham820.com>.

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