

Perspectives

Vol. 1 Issue 8, December 2009

From Cairo to Goldston: U.S. Credibility in the Arab World at Stake

by Nadia Bilbassy-Charters

The election of President Barack Obama last November generated unprecedented goodwill across the Arab and Muslim worlds. A recent Pew Research Center¹ poll has indicated that America's image in the world improved since Obama took office. Although many still separate his impressive personal narrative from his policies, there has nevertheless been a serious change of attitudes. Obama's overtures towards the Arab world and willingness to engage on equal footing altered the Arab view that U.S. foreign policy was principally comprised of pre-emptive strikes, unilateral action, and a one-sided, unbalanced approach to the Middle East peace process. Indeed, with a global financial meltdown, two wars, and a divided international community, the world was ready to welcome the new leader and work with him.

President Obama approached the international community with an attitude of cooperation and a preference for diplomacy over military action, and his June speech in Cairo gave new momentum to Arab hopes for a change of course in U.S. foreign policy. He touched on issues that resonate with the Arab world when he articulated his view on the role of international law in foreign policy. The president contrasted his own approach with the principles of his predecessor President W. Bush, highlighting international legal standards' "vital role in fighting terrorism," and stating that the Bush administration's decision to "cast aside" important frameworks, such as the Geneva Conventions, served as a major setback to the promotion of American values abroad. June 4th in Cairo brought forth many hopes and promises, marking a new era in of U.S.-Arab relations.

However, since the speech, Obama has had to face only one true test of his administration's rhetoric in the eyes of Arabs: the U.S. response to the Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict - or as it has come to be known, the "Goldstone report." An experienced South African judge, Richard Goldstone was appointed to investigate the possibility of war crimes committed during the Israeli operation against the militant group Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The war commenced on December 27, 2008, and lasted for almost three weeks. According to the Palestine Center for Human Rights², the war resulted in the death of 1,400 Palestinians, mainly civilians (including over 400 women and children), another 4,000 wounded, some permanently disabled and with no source of income, and the death of 13 Israelis.

The 575-page report holds both Israel and Hamas responsible for committing war crimes, and demands

that both sides carry out an independent and transparent internal investigation. When the report was handed over to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, it presented both a crisis and an opportunity to Obama's Middle East peace strategy. Israel relied again on an automatic U.S. veto on its behalf, despite some signs of unprecedented nuance in the administration's response.

If the Cairo speech marked a new era in U.S.-Arab relations, the challenges presented by the Goldstone report have brought two different narratives of the 2009 Gaza conflict to the surface. However the U.S. chose to react officially to the report would demonstrate whether or not a real change had occurred, and whether the new administration was truly stepping away (or not) from its perceived bias

"This single act greatly damaged America's image across the Arab world at a time when perceptions were changing for the better."

towards Israel. The House of Representatives voted 344 to 36 in favor of a non-binding resolution calling on President Obama to maintain his opposition to the Goldstone report.

The Obama administration also ordered its ambassador in Geneva to vote against the report and rally support from other countries in an attempt to block it from reaching the UN general assembly for discussion.

The repercussions of the efforts sent shock waves across the Arab world. Any high hopes that the new administration was diverging from the previous one on policy soon evaporated. The visible pressure at the UN Human Rights Council to thwart the Goldstone recommendations caused significant negative implications for Obama's reputation and his broader public diplomacy efforts in the region.

This single act greatly damaged America's image across the Arab world at a time when perceptions were changing for the better. It further reinforced the view that Israel can act with impunity and that the United States will side with it regardless. Such actions are bound to arm extremists in the region with the perfect propaganda tool-- that the United States is not serious about prosecuting human rights violations with regards to the rights of civilians granted under the fourth Geneva Convention.

As Judge Goldstone remarked in a New York Times op-

ed, "Pursuing justice in this case is essential because no state or armed group should be above the law. Western governments in particular face a challenge because they have pushed for accountability in places like Darfur, but now must do the same with Israel, an ally and a democratic state." Israel's impunity from American reprimand, besides further tarnishing the image of America in the Arab world, sends the message to other regimes who commit gross human right violations that they too are accountable to no one, providing they maintain friendly relations with Western powers. As a defender of human rights and accountability, the U.S. loses moral ground in the Arab world.

In a recent interview I conducted with Judge Goldstone, he explained why his integrity was questioned by the United States and others. "If you don't like the message, you attack the messenger," he said. It happened before in Goldstone's previous investigations of war crime allegations in apartheid South Africa, in Bosnia, and it is happening again now in Israel. The difference here is that the United States' credibility as a law-abiding nation has been further jeopardized at a crucial moment in history when it is attempting to rebuild relationships with the Arab world.

It is important to look at local reactions to U.S. foreign policy and public diplomacy efforts in the Arab world. One of the most frequently cited complaints I come across, as I gauge reactions across the Arab world towards the United States' policy, is hypocrisy. This is particularly the case when it comes to America's claim of supporting democracy in the Arab world. U.S. support for Israel is understandable if the justification is that Israel is the sole democracy in the Middle East, but by that measure America should be also supporting any democratic efforts, regardless of the politics. When Hamas, a violent group categorized by the U.S. government as a terrorist organization, was democratically elected in the Palestinian Territories, the U.S. response was to boycott the new government. The U.S. could have made a clear distinction between support for the democratic process and support for the outcome, but instead they fueled – and some would say proved – the perception that American officials are being disingenuous when they speak of supporting democracy in the Middle East.³

Among the casualties of the U.S. veto of the Goldstone report was Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The sole reliable Palestinian ally with whom the U.S. had worked towards brokering a peace agreement and stability, Abbas decided to ultimately not stand in the next Palestinian Authority's Presidential elections, leaving a possible power vacuum that could be filled by less-amicable negotiation partners. Informed sources told me that Abbas came under pressure from the Obama administration to hold the report and delay submitting it to the UNHRC for fear of "spoiling the atmosphere" conducive to negotiation with Israel. Hamas, who rejected the initial appointment of Judge Goldstone, labeling him a Zionist, embraced the report and used it against President Abbas, calling him a traitor and demanding that his Palestinian passport be withdrawn.

How will President Obama's image emerge from all of this? To what extent can the U.S. enjoy credibility in the Middle East as a peace broker when its interests, which remain tied to Israel regardless of circumstances, conflict with the claims and pleas of the Arab world?

Successive U.S. administrations promoted the concepts of freedom, human rights, reform, democracy and rule of law, while supporting the most repressive regimes in Latin America and the Middle East. These facts are not lost on many ordinary people in the region, and any efforts to promote democracy are therefore examined with a cynical eye. Above all, it is "trust capital" that has been squandered and lost over the years, trust that was slowly being rebuilt by the promise of change that Obama embodies.

The Arab world does not ask for a U.S. bias in its favor but rather for impartiality. Justice cannot be divided; it must apply to all equally, under any circumstances, or "credibility" and "common interests" become only words in a series of nicely crafted speeches. To the Arab world, actions once again speak louder than words, and the failure of the Cairo speech to materialize in tangible actions after Goldstone may go down in history as just another missed opportunity for both sides.

(1) "Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World." Pew Research Center. July 23, 2009.

(2) "Confirmed figures reveal true extent of the destruction." Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. March 12, 2009.

(3) Ottaway, Marina. "Promoting Democracy after Hamas' Victory." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 30, 2009.



Nadia Bilbassy-Charters has been based in Washington DC since June 2003. She was Al arabiya TV Diplomatic Correspondent until June 2008. She rejoined MBC group as their Chief Correspondent and media personality in the United States. She covers the White House and the State Dept. She focuses on America's foreign policy and its relationship with the Arab and Moslem world. She is the only Arab journalist to have interviewed president George W Bush four times. Ms Bilbassy was based in Nairobi, Kenya as a War Correspondent from 1996-2003. She covered most of Africa's wars. In 2003 she was embedded with 101 Marine Division on the push to Baghdad. Prior to moving to Africa, she was based in Colombo, Sri Lanka as a reporter for IPS, and the Independent. Ms Bilbassy started her career with Agence France Press, AFP in both Gaza and Jerusalem covering the first Palestinian Intifada of December 1987. She also lectures in many US universities. In 2006 she was chosen as an international fellow at Yale University.

Perspectives is a monthly opinion piece authored by leading practitioners and academics in the fields of public diplomacy and Arab media. The publication provides a forum to contextualize and analyze salient topics, concepts and developments that are of interest to the public diplomacy community as well as to Arab media followers. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc.

Layalina Productions, Inc. helps bridge the divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialogues through effective television programming and publications. Layalina is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation funded through tax-deductible donations from individuals and corporations, and through grants by foundations based in the U.S. and the Arab world. Please support Layalina by making a tax-deductible donation. Visit www.Layalina.tv or call 202-776-7761 for more information.