

# The Layalina Review

## On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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### McHale Addresses Security Issues

After two weeks in office, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Judith Mchale, addressed students from the YES program and received mixed reviews from the blog world.

In her June 11 speech for the State Department's Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program, Judith A. Mchale outlined her role while stressing the importance of multi-leveled public diplomacy for the US to 330 students, from 18 different predominantly Muslim countries, who were completing their study abroad year.

She explained that the Obama administration is fully committed to increasing and continuing the use of public diplomacy worldwide in order to strengthen and create relationships internationally.

McHale defines the mechanisms of public diplomacy as communication, through new and traditional media, and engagement, through "people to people" interactions, and larger cultural and policy exchanges.

With increased access to technology and media, individuals have more power and voice in the state than ever before, which implies that public diplomacy concerns them first. As an example she references President Obama's recent speech in Cairo, and how it has been translated into 14 languages and reached 170 countries.

McHale used US aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan as the most important example of engagement, stressing that this region is the place most in need of public diplomacy. She says that, "since 2002, the United States has provided a total of more than \$3.4 billion to alleviate suffering and promote economic growth, education, health, security and good governance in Pakistan."

This aid includes English teaching and text messaging initiatives to communicate where the US aid programs are located. Mchale concluded her speech by repeating the importance of forging new and stronger friendships worldwide.

Matt Armstrong discusses the Under Secretary's speech in his blog, MountainRunner, calling it "good and full of promise" despite the lack of specific details. However, he highlighted, "This is not a propaganda contest - it is a relationship race. And we have got to get back in the game," to illustrate Mchale's understanding of her position.

Armstrong criticizes Mchale's failure to point out that the text message service, in relation to President Obama's speech, is not global. Overall Armstrong maintains that Mchale reiterated the previous Under Secretary's, Jim K. Glassman, points. However, she has one advantage over him; she enjoys the support of the president and the Secretary of State.

Blogger, TOX, posting on the MountainRunner as well, is far less impressed by Mchale's speech, comparing her remarks to "a safe, conservative, bureaucrat". He writes that though she is knowledgeable and well-spoken, her lack of details and specifics has him less convinced.

TOX advises Mchale to review the speech and to include more details. TOX recommends that Mchale answer all questions, with the help of a focus group of experts, and to post the answers online, similar to the type of strategic review President Obama used before his speech in Cairo.

Similar to TOX, William Kiehl, writes in his blog, My PD Blog, that despite a well written and prepared speech Mchale's use of buzz words and State jargon, like "global engagement" and "strategic communications," means little, action is needed behind the words. Kiehl says that though there are talks of

positive initiatives, there needs to be a more dramatic change in legislation and action from the new administration.

Overall Mchale is seen as well spoken during her speech, especially considering that she has only been in office for two weeks, but bloggers and critics anxiously

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wait for the details of her plans regarding communication and engagement with the international community.

## Obama Establishes New Boundaries

From a public diplomacy standpoint, President Obama's June 4th speech to the Muslim world could very well become "the foundation for a serious, ongoing conversation which could, as the President put it, 'remake this world,'" argues Marc Lynch for his Foreign Policy blog.

Lynch offered his initial impressions of the speech, calling it "one of the most successful public diplomacy and strategic communications campaigns I can ever remember," and praised Obama for addressing a wide range of issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nuclear weapons, violent extremism, democracy, religious freedom, and women's rights.

Obama's speech was aimed at initiating a conversation with the Muslim-majority countries, and signaled a departure from the type of caustic relationship of the past eight years, writes Mike Madden for Salon.

Madden, like many others, praised the "thoughtful tone" of the speech and stressed Obama's powerful invocation of the Qu'ran and other religious texts as a way of stressing unity and peace over the "us vs. them" rhetoric of the past.

"In true Obama form, he balanced criticism of the Muslim world with a recognition that Western powers hadn't always acted blamelessly toward it, and set off each recognition of the nuances of life in the Middle East with a defense of his own country."

Some, however, remained skeptical that despite the victory in public diplomacy, nothing will get done unless Islamic states are willing to take action themselves, argues Rob Marquand for The Christian Science Monitor.

Marquand spoke with Karim Emile Bitar, a Lebanese-French international relations specialist and president of the KB Consulting Group in Paris, who thought the speech was "excellent" and yet signaled his wariness that nothing would be done.

"...While this may have been public diplomacy at its best, one should remember that due to decades of mistrust, even America's best rhetoric won't make the Arab world rise to the occasion without consistent concrete initiative and actions," said Bitar.

From a different perspective, in an article for the Huffington Post, independent journalist Derek Flood criticized Obama's choice of Cairo as a location to give his speech, arguing that, combined with his earlier visit to Riyadh, "Obama is further buttressing the al-Qaeda leadership's *raison d'etre*."

*"Obama's monologue sought to restore the region's dignity and sow the seeds of future cooperation while emphasizing plurality and tolerance."*

*Derek Flood, independent journalist.*

Flood argues that the choice of these two cities as destinations will ultimately undermine Obama's message of unity and peace due to the perceived human rights violations and inherent corruption of these two regimes.

Still, Flood praised Obama's nuanced nod to religious pluralism of the Arab world: "Obama's monologue sought to restore the region's dignity and sow the seeds of future cooperation while emphasizing plurality and tolerance."

Another way the White House attempted to reinitiate the dialogue with the Middle East was through the use of technology, including new media outlets, to broadcast the speech to as many people as possible, writes Kelly Chernenkoff for Fox News.

The State Department set up a website which allowed people sign up to receive free SMS updates of the speech in real-time in Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu, and English. Users could even respond with their comments, some of which were posted online.

Chernenkoff notes that US Press Secretary Robert Gibbs stressed the fact that using new media – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and MySpace – to provide updates in real-time is consistent with the administration's desire to set up an enhanced and interactive conversation, rather than a mere address.

Gibbs said that this was an indication of future dialogue that the Obama administration wishes to set up. "This is not a one-time event," Gibbs stated.

Following the speech, the White House posted a video of Obama's speech in its entirety as well as a full transcript online, writes Chris Lefkowitz for Agence France Presse.

While some did not consider the speech revolutionary enough, the consensus seems to be that it was a step in the right direction in terms of confronting and dealing with many of the most serious issues shaping US-Middle Eastern relations today.

Marc Lynch writes, "As [Obama] frankly recognized, no one speech can overcome the many problems he addressed. But this speech is an essential starting point in a genuine conversation, a respectful dialogue on core issues."

Go to [WhiteHouse.gov](http://WhiteHouse.gov) for a full transcript of Obama's speech.

## Satellite TV Expands in the MidEast

Internet Protocol TV (IPTV) is in its initial stage of penetration in the Arab world and is still developing, according to a study conducted by Arab Advisors Group, reports Trade Arabia. As broadband adoption increases in the region, several operators in the Arab world have plans to implement IPTV (also called TV over IP) in the near future, the study explained. Seven service providers in six countries - Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar

and UAE - offer commercial IPTV services in the Mena region, the report stated.

Additionally, there are ongoing or planned projects by the service providers and/or governments in countries including Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Tunisia, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, to offer local IPTV services in the future, Faten Bader, an Arab Advisors senior research analyst, said in the report.

The experts pointed out that a massive supply of free to air (FTA) channels and the widespread piracy of DVDs and Pay TV were the major obstacles facing IPTV providers. This makes the TV viewing experience more interactive and personalized, Bader pointed out.

In related news, the Arab world's FTA Sat TV channels have grown by 28.1% between August 2007 and March 2009, reports Al-Bawaba. By March of this year, the total number of FTA satellite channels reached 474 broadcasting on Arabsat, Nilesat and/or Noorsat.

A new 84-page report entitled, "Satellite TV in the Arab World 2009," was released to the Arab Advisors Group's Media Strategic Research Service subscribers on May 2009. The channels are analyzed according to their type and content, broadcasting language, main offices, ownership (state owned, private or mixed ownership) and satellite carriers.

"Of the 474 channels, 46 were in test transmission mode. 82.7% of the 428 fully launched and operational FTA satellite channels broadcast exclusively in Arabic. The remaining languages [broadcast] lag far behind the Arabic language. English follows with a 7.2% share," Danya Nusseir, an Arab Advisors senior research analyst, commented.

"In line with the liberalization of the audio visual sectors in the region, the number of private satellite channels exceeds the number of government owned channels: 72.4% are privately owned while 26.6% are government owned," Mr. Issa Goussous, another Arab Advisors Senior research analyst, argued.

The boom in the supply of free satellite TV channels in the Arab region seems to have stifled the terrestrial TV landscape, reports Zaway. Local terrestrial TV stations are still alive in the region, but regulations and market dynamics have insured that, except in a few countries,

the number of terrestrial TV stations has not grown in the past few years.

There are 129 terrestrial TV stations broadcasting in 19 Arab countries. Palestine, Egypt and Iraq lead in the number of terrestrial TV stations, constituting 50.4% of total terrestrial TV channels in the Arab world, according to the news site.

*"In line with the liberalization of the audio visual sectors in the region, the number of private satellite channels exceeds the number of government owned channels."*

*Issa Goussous, Arab Advisors Senior research analyst.*

The majority of Palestine's and Iraq's terrestrial TV channels are privately owned and they constitute 83.6% of total private terrestrial TV channels in the Arab world. Egypt has the largest number of government-owned terrestrial TV channels.

"According to surveys conducted by Arab Advisors Group, terrestrial TV channels in the region still have a relatively large audience although much reduced than before the satellite TV era. In Lebanon, for example, 93.9% of respondents surveyed who watch TV said that they still have access to terrestrial television," wrote Miss Noura Abdulhadi, an Arab Advisors Senior Research Analyst.

"Arab Advisors Group's analysis reveals that the vast majority of those countries covered still have full government ownership of the operational terrestrial TV channels," Miss Abdulhadi added.

However, it seems that new media technologies have also bolstered democratic trends in the Middle East, reports PBS. Along with the internet,

satellite broadcasting has fostered remarkable change in the way Arab societies, which tend to favor traditional and group-oriented values, engage in open discussions about politics and society.

Arab satellite channels and networks enjoy the freedom to broadcast content that is largely unrestricted by the state-controlled media. Programming on many Arab satellite channels — prominent among them Qatar-based Al-Jazeera, London-based MBC and Lebanon's small but influential, Hezbollah-run Al-Manar — features frank and sometimes controversial reporting and discussion of social and political issues.

With opportunities for call-in participation by viewers, such programming is threaded with strands of democratic discourse: freedom of opinion, diversity and respect for minority points of view.

Arab satellite networks trend not only toward democratization but also profit, taking into account many facets of Western commercial broadcasting models, including audience demographics, branding and market share. The networks' ability to serve as conduits for change dovetails neatly with this dual mission.

Produced by Arabs for Arab audiences, satellite programming content often acknowledges and defers to Arab social norms, with self-regulation replacing state-imposed censorship. Nonetheless, PBS remarks that while not hindered by direct state control, Arab satellite TV is vulnerable to supra-governmental checks emanating from the region. The Charter [what charter?] passed by the information ministers of the Arab League member countries illustrates this point.

More importantly, Arab satellite broadcasting plays a key role in democratizing the region as an agent of indigenous and evolutionary change, and as such, is particularly relevant to American interests and policy goals in the Arab Middle East and, by extension, throughout the Muslim world in the post-September 11 era.

The process of democratization is slow and subject to pressures and influences from within and without. US policies aimed at advancing the process have thus far sought to inject American values via hard-power and soft-power interventions alike.

## Iraqi Media Struggles with Propaganda

Many Iraqis have come to ridicule a high-priced US media campaign aimed at improving the military's image and promoting democracy, reports UPI. The Arabic-language newspaper Baghdad Now is one of the products dismissed in Iraq as US propaganda, which attempts to show a harmonious portrayal of Iraqis and US soldiers working together.

"The millions spent on this is wasted money," Ziyad Al-Aajeely, director of Iraq's nonprofit Journalistic Freedom Observatory said. "Nobody reads this." During the last six years, the US government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on billboards, printed material, and television and radio airtime aimed at marginalizing extremists and fostering reconciliation in Iraq.

Baghdad Now is part of America's huge psychological warfare campaign to influence Iraqis' behavior and attitudes, explains the Washington Post.

In a country where security forces have a checkered reputation and sectarian tension remains high, many Iraqis have grown dismissive of the flood of propaganda they know or assume comes from the US government.

Baghdad Now is not labeled as a US military publication, although the military acknowledges it is produced by an Army psychological operations unit and distributed for free by soldiers. Piles of it are left at entrances to the Green Zone for passersby to pick up.

The Washington Post reports, "A front-page ad showed Iraqis marching down a street, apparently protesting. Under the image was the statement: 'The security forces protect your right to demonstrate peacefully.'"

Another edition included a cartoon showing a maimed insurgent leaving Iraq as a smiling refugee returns. "This is so wrong," Al-Aajeely said with a chuckle. "The people in charge of this are not professional journalists. They do it the same way the prior regime did its newspapers," he added, referring to

publications that hewed to the narrative Saddam Hussein wanted to push.

"The Iraqi media landscape is a peculiar one," says Gary Gambill, editor of Mideast Monitor, for Online Opinion. According to him, the fall of Baghdad to US-led forces nearly six years ago opened the doors to a flood of new private media, the likes of which the Arab world has never seen.

Despite the wide variety of publications and radio and television stations that sprung up, "to this day, Iraq has no substantial media licensing restrictions or any official censorship." Nevertheless, intimidation, violence and death threats are numerous, constantly hampering the work of journalists.

Most major Iraqi media outlets are oriented toward the outlook and interests of a single ethno-sectarian community and sponsored by partisan political or religious forces. They typically avoid overtly sectarian language, adopting more subtle cues for differentiation. Gambill asserts that, "direct calls for violence are rare in aboveground media outlets, but indirect incitement of sectarian animosity is common."

Coupled with dire economic conditions, where advertising markets are not nearly sufficient to support a profitable media sector, leave a vacuum to be filled by political parties who can fund media outlets in exchange for a profitable image.

Gambill remarks that meanwhile, good faith efforts by the State Department and USAID to bolster the professionalism and ethics of the Iraqi media were quietly undermined by the Pentagon. First revealed by the Los Angeles Times in late 2005, the US military paid editors of Iraqi newspapers to publish over 1,000 heavily-slanted articles written by US officers using Arabic pseudonyms.

Gambill maintains that this is the legacy of the Baathist rule, a time when the media were tightly controlled and when real journalism did not exist. Optimistic observers frequently draw comparisons to Lebanon, where the media are dominated by the leading political factions of each sect and offer a diverse range of viewpoints.

"However, Iraq lacks the deep-rooted tradition of civil liberties, political pluralism and free enterprise that underlies media independence in Lebanon. Lack

of state restrictions on the media is not an ingrained trait of Iraqi governance, but instead a reflection of contingent political factors subject to change."

*"Lack of state restrictions on the media is not an ingrained trait of Iraqi governance, but instead a reflection of contingent political factors subject to change."*

*Gary Gambill, editor of Mideast Monitor.*

Others fear that media pluralism serves to reinforce divisions in Iraqi society. Gambill asserts that with all major socio-political forces "having minimally accepted the country's new constitutional order and committed to resolving differences at the ballot box," the greatest danger for Iraq is that Shiite, Kurdish and moderate Sunni governing elites will use their control of the state to weaken the media networks of their political rivals.

"This would obstruct the growth of independent alternatives, producing a multipolar parallel to the state-media relationships prevailing in other Arab states," concludes Gambill.

In related news, The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory (JFO) highlight several issues that harm press freedom in Iraq. Both groups point to a number of assaults and instances of harassment which have occurred in recent months and were committed by government officials against journalists in various parts of the country under the control of Iraq's central government..

Since 2003, the press in Iraq has made significant strides as hundreds of independent, party- or state-run newspapers, radio and television stations have emerged, notes CPJ. However, Iraq is also the most dangerous country in the world for journalists, with 139 journalists and 51 Iraqi media workers dead.

In recent months, many journalists have faced harassment and in some cases assault, by Iraqi security forces. In other cases, high-ranking government officials have used lawsuits as a political tool to obstruct and silence the news media.

The CPJ further describes cases of journalists who have been detained, harassed or persecuted. Such is the example of Jassam, a freelance photographer working for Reuters, who was detained on September 2, 2008 by US and Iraqi forces during a raid at his home in Mahmoodiya, South of Baghdad. On November 30, the Iraqi Central Criminal Court ruled there was no evidence to hold Jassam and ordered the US military to release him from Camp Cropper near Baghdad, Reuters reported. The US military has not yet complied with this order.

## Religious TV Spurs Tensions

Religious satellite TV stations are gaining ground in the Middle East, often reflecting political and religious tensions, such as is in Egypt between the Muslim brotherhood and the Salafists, remark Nathan Field and Ahmed Hamam for Arab Media Society.

While religious television is not new in Egypt, since 2006, several new stations have been founded which focus on preaching from a more puritanical perspective that does not emphasize politics. Experts believe these to be the most watched channels in Egypt.

Field and Haman point out that, "NileSat, Egypt's main satellite broadcaster, currently carries at least twelve stations that give significant airtime to Salafi programming." Notably, Al-Nass and al-Rahma are the most popular stations due to the star power of their main preachers.

Al-Nass was revamped in 2006 by a Saudi investor who invited three prominent Salafi clerics to host religious programming.

Since that time the station has been dominated by Salafi-oriented preaching. Founded in 2007, Al-Rahma (Mercy) is owned by Mohamad Hassan, considered by many to be the most influential Salafi preacher in Egypt. Since the station is owned by clerics, they have control over programming and therefore doctrine, not market concerns, determines its content.

The near total exclusion of women from the airwaves reflects Salafism's more rigid views on gender relations – a clear distinction from non-Salafi media, argue the authors. Another feature of Salafi networks is an unwillingness to give platforms to non-Salafi viewpoints.

Field and Haman explain that Egyptians are not becoming more conservative because Salafi networks appeared in 2006. "People do not embrace rigid ideas because they read them in a book or heard them on TV. Rather their social environment determines how they interpret the words of the Qur'an – perhaps rigidly, to come to grips with the realities they experience on a daily basis," notes Rafiq Habib, an expert in the field.

The cultural dimension – especially the rampant spread of Western influence in the media – explains Salafism's appeal to more affluent Egyptians. Field and Hamam continue, "on a daily basis, the average Muslim is bombarded with messages that implicitly or quite explicitly challenge basic tenets of their Islamic identity."

They also point to the political dimension of the victory of the brotherhood in 2005 in the parliament, which may have awoken a youth expecting them to focus more on preaching at the expense of politics.

Religious channels may also heighten sectarian tensions, bringing a Sunni satellite television station based out of the Gulf to attack Shiites during its broadcasts, reports Faris Harram for Iraq Oil Report.

The channel, named "Al-Khalijiyah," has quickly become notorious for its attacks on Shiite Muslims and their religious authorities. In Najaf, the holy Shiite city, local residents say the channel has become a source of provocation.

"If I have ten nuclear bombs, I would use one against Christians and Jews, and the remaining nine against Shiites," proclaimed a recently-broadcast slogan. Another declared, "oh God...

humiliate the Shiites and those who support them; count them all, without skipping any of them, and kill them all."

Residents in Iraq and in the region fear a renewal of sectarian violence that would be fueled by such programming. Many Shiites are disturbed by the fact that the channel has not been shut down.

Kathim, an architect, believes that dialogue over Islamic sects and their beliefs should be exclusively initiated by Islamic scholars. "It is wrong to see that dialogue taking the form of sectarian and violent rhetoric, and it is wrong to allow those who are not specialists

*"On a daily basis, the average Muslim is bombarded with messages that implicitly or quite explicitly challenge basic tenets of their Islamic identity."*

*Nathan Field and Ahmed Hamam, Arab Media Society.*

in this topic to discuss it," he said.

Then, a few weeks ago, the channel launched an offensive against the Shiite community, namely in Iraq. A daily program entitled, "The prevention of Sedition," now airs, and some people have called in asking for the "needed support to exterminate the Shiites in Iraq."

The proclamations aired by al-Khalijiyah come at the same time as continuing protests in Najaf against statements directed at BBC Arabic by Sheikh Adel al-Kalbani, the Imam of the Holy Mosque in Saudi Arabia in which he explicitly calls Shiite scientists infidels. These statements provoked a wave of protests in Iraq, the Islamic world and Saudi Arabia itself.

Yet, even as the controversy flares, others are calm and dismiss the channel as insignificant, concludes Harram.

## Iran Bans Media Coverage

Very shortly after the elections in Iran, the government slowed the speed of the Internet and limited access to Web sites in ways that show the growing technical skills of the country's Web censors, reports the Wall Street Journal.

Iranians have shared online images, video, emails and "tweets" about the protests and spreading violence — circumventing state-controlled media. As the protests increased, so did the government's control and repressive measures to curb the flow of information.

The Wall Street Journal explains that the government has also put stringent limits on reporters' access to demonstrations. The protests made the front-page news across the Middle East, with heavy coverage on Al-Jazeera and other Arab satellite news outlets.

However, the reporting ban affects all foreign reporters — Western and non-Western alike. "Iranian state media released footage and still photos of a rally in support of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but few camera crews appeared to brave the ban to capture footage of supporters of challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi," reports the news site.

The National concurs, pointing out the numerous foreign media outlets which have been banned from reporting in the streets of Iran, as the protests continue into their third day. The culture ministry said journalists could continue to work from their offices but that it was canceling press accreditation for all foreign media, Reuters reported.

"I wouldn't speculate about why they've done this," said John Pullman, the head of output at Al-Jazeera English. "They say it is because they cannot guarantee the security of people on the streets."

Since Sunday, Al-Arabiya has been reporting on the situation in Iran from its Dubai headquarters. "Now we rely on calling eyewitnesses from the newsroom, and try to compare different versions to get the real picture," said Dr Nabil al Khatib, the executive editor of Al-Arabiya.

The National reports that, according

to commentators, there was evidence of the editorial differences between Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya's reporting, claiming that Al-Jazeera may have taken side with the Iranian government.

"My impression was that they are hitting both sides," said Tuqan Tuqan, a Palestinian IT and television consultant who was keeping an eye on Al-Jazeera's Arabic coverage over the weekend from his home in Stockholm.

*"This seems to be part of the Iranian Authorities' plan to limit news coverage of the possible consequences of a contentious election."*

*Peter Horrocks, director of BBC World Service.*

BBC also complained of an electronic jamming that occurred shortly before the election and that has further deteriorated since, according to Digital Journal.

"This seems to be part of the Iranian Authorities' plan to limit news coverage of the possible consequences of a contentious election" declared Peter Horrocks, Director of the BBC World Service. "Any attempt at jamming BBC Persian is unjustified and is contrary to international treaties concerning communication satellites."

Other reports from Tehran indicate that social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have been taken down since the elections. SMS texting services have also been curtailed.

The media organization Reporters Without Borders, which campaigns for press freedom, issued a statement today that read "The blocking of access to foreign news media has been stepped up. In addition to the blocking of the BBC's website, the Farsi-language satellite

broadcasts of the Voice of America and BBC — which are very popular in Iran — have been partially jammed."

Gulf Arab governments, fearing growing Iranian power in the region gave a muted reaction to hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election victory, reports Reuters. "Falsifying the results is the easiest of tasks for a religious-security regime that does not believe in leaving to chance what it considers to be its right," wrote Abdul-Rahman al-Rashed in Saudi daily Asharq Al-Awsat.

Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV said Iran had closed its office for a week without reason. "The Saudis are paranoid about Iran and have even more reason to be so after Ahmadinejad's reelection," said a Western diplomat in Riyadh.

Around 200 Iranians demonstrated outside the Iranian consulate in Dubai on Monday. Dubai has become a haven for Iranians escaping United Nations sanctions on Iran. "The only reason I support Ahmadinejad's election win is his bold defiance of the United States with the nuclear program," said Suhail Al-Rajhi, an Omani secondary school teacher.

## New Media at Work in Lebanese Elections

Following the victory of the American-backed March 14 coalition in the Lebanese Parliamentary elections on June 7th, political analysts are looking towards the Obama Administration as a major player in swaying voters away from the Syria-Iranian aligned March 8 coalition, according to the New York Times.

The March 14 coalition victory is attributed, in part, to Obama's campaign of outreach to the Arab and Muslim world, completely overturning the predicted victory of the Hezbollah-led party. For the first time in the Middle East, being aligned with the United States did not hurt a political coalition, perhaps beginning a new trend in the region.

Osama Safa, director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, told the

New York Times, “Lebanon is a telling case... It is no longer relevant for the extremists to use the anti-American card. It does look like the US is moving on to something new.”

*“It is no longer relevant for the extremists to use the anti-American card. It does look like the US is moving on to something new.”*

*Osama Safa, director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.*

While President Obama strove to send a conciliatory message to the Middle East in his speech to Cairo, some analysts similarly have been accrediting some stake in the victory to Vice President Joe Biden. Though his actions in Beirut were derided at first, it is now said that his speech contributed in solidifying the choice of the essential swing Christian voters.

Robert Satloff, for the Middle East Strategy at Harvard, suggests that Biden’s visit to Lebanon was his way of playing hardball with the Lebanese voters by reminding them that Washington would be reviewing financial assistance to, and their relations with the nation depending on the outcome of the election. Christian voters “cast their ballots in droves for candidates opposed to the Hezbollah-backed alliance and, in so doing, appear to have turned the tide of the election.”

Whether it was Obama’s speech of reconciliation that defused anti-American sentiment in the region or Biden’s reminder of what the country might lose by voting for radicals and extremists, there is no question that new forms of social media have changed the political landscape of the 2009 elections.

According to OnOffBeirut, there was a scarce online presence of the candidates

in the Parliamentary elections of 2005. That was not the case this time around. As politicians have acknowledged the importance of new media in reaching out to voters, more have registered their own domain names, created websites and kept up with their own Facebook pages, each with a full biography of the candidate and explanation of their political platform.

Using social media to keep in touch with followers living both within the borders of the country as well as abroad, candidates are able to reach out to voters in a way that Lebanon had never seen before. By announcing events, TV appearances and promotional festivals, supporters have been able to stay more informed. Politicians, though less likely to engage in communication through spam databases, used text messaging to distribute information for a bigger outreach.

As younger voters got involved in the election, they were able to create fan pages for candidates, becoming an unofficial outlet for support. Through numerous means, social media allowed users to take their own initiatives and communicate with one another about politics.

The use of new media complemented the existing campaigns of the candidates, allowing for a greater outreach and a renewed interest in politics for a younger generation. Whatever the reason, be it Obama’s speech in Cairo, Biden’s visit to Lebanon, or simply the popularity of Facebook fan pages, the victory of the American-backed party shows that this new trend has the potential to emerge in favor of change in Middle Eastern politics.

By proving that it is no longer a disadvantage to align with the US, Lebanon could set the tone for improved public diplomacy between America and the Arab world.

## Cinema Re-opens in Saudi Arabia after Three Decades

David Oliver quipped in The Guardian, “MENAHI IS #1 film in Riyadh. Actually,

it turns out to be the only movie in Riyadh.

However, he reports that the move was a major step forward for Saudi Arabia, a country which has banned film going for the past three decades. Religious hardliners in the 1970s pushed the government to ban the practice, in order to avoid the temptation of genders mixing in dark places, along with their perception of the movie industry as a lavish, sinful expenditure.

Coinciding with President Barack Obama’s visit to the country, the film “Menahi” screened in theaters in Jeddah, Taif, Jazan, and Riyadh, reports Arab News. Women were allowed in the screenings outside Riyadh, albeit on separate floors of the theaters.

However, in the June 6 screening at the King Fahd Cultural Center in Riyadh, a city where Islamic interpretations generally run more conservative, officials from production company Rotana were unable to gain government permission for women to attend, the Associated Press reports.

Publicity in Riyadh was reportedly “discreet, apparently out of fear opponents would gather en masse to stop the screening,” according to AP. Pakistan’s The News reports that “A phalanx of police was recruited to fend off the Islamic activists” who showed up, evidently unaffiliated with the government.

Dubai, is the second film from media conglomerate Rotana, reports Qatar Happening. Rotana officials estimate that 25,000 viewers (9,000 of whom are women) have now seen the film, which originally screened months ago in Jeddah and Taif.

Rotana is owned by royal media mogul, Saudi Prince Waleed bin Talal. In addition to its production company, Rotana dominates the Arab entertainment scene with television and radio stations, a record label, and upscale hotels across the Middle East.

The BBC points out that Prince Waleed has said he believes theaters will eventually reopen in the Kingdom. No stranger to controversy in his progressive steps, Prince Waleed’s wife, Princess Ameerah, declared to The Telegraph earlier this year that she wants to be the first female to drive in Saudi Arabia. Conservatives leader Youssef Al-Ahmed has publically denounced Prince Waleed bin Talal as being as dangerous as drug

dealers for permitting the showing of movies on his television network.

*“They are afraid of the unknown, their beliefs are genuine as ours are, and therefore we should open channels of communication with them, understand their fears and give them assurances.”*

*Hassan Al-Asiri.*

There were minor protests by religious conservatives at the screening, who hurled epithets at the lead actor, Fayz Al-Maliki, and for a moment, the audience.

Actor Al-Maliki responded by saying, “They do not represent Islam, have no official standing and cannot be considered guardians of virtue. Therefore, they have no real influence.” Al-Maliki added that the actions of the religious protestors are “not the essence of Islam. It is more of an individual act and is not a proper way to project righteous things.”

According to the Arab News, Saudi actor and producer Hassan Al-Asiri, Al-Maliki’s costar, said that Saudi society needs dialogue to work through cultural concerns. “They are afraid of the unknown, their beliefs are genuine as ours are, and therefore we should open channels of communication with them, understand their fears and give them assurances.”

Al-Asiri believes that the Ministry of Culture and Information should develop and publicize a gradual plan for reopening movie theaters, according to Arab News. He suggests a timeline where only Saudi films would be allowed

for the first ten years, then Gulf films for the next seven years, then the last three years could open the Kingdom up to films from across the Arab world.

Al-Asiri points out that, even for concerned groups like portions of the government and religious conservatives, cinemas can provide a useful tool in solving social problems and promoting good values. “The theater will also give the young a media that is easier to control than the TV, where 18 million Saudis are watching with no control or censorship,” he said.

Some say gradual change is wise, like 25-year-old Talal Saleh, who went to one of the first screenings. “This is a conservative society that’s not used to mixing,” he said. “Change should happen gradually.” Others still found the situation dull. Saudi businessman Abdul Mohsen al-Mani, who attended the screening with his sons, told Agence France Presse, “This is the first step in a peaceful revolution,” he told AFP. “I don’t want my two sons to grow up in the dark ... I told them that in the future they will talk about today like a joke.”

Overall, protestors were “politely ignored,” according to BBC News, and moviegoers had a good time. Misfir Al-Sibai, a 21-year-old Saudi moviegoer, said, “It was just beautiful to see people look so animated and happy. [...] That was the best part of the evening.”

## Arab Press Skeptical of Obama’s Speech

Arab media have been largely divided regarding President Obama’s speech in Cairo, Egypt.

While some believe President Obama’s speech demarks America’s new role in setting a peaceful agenda with the Muslim world, others remain cautious of his “well-crafted” words, which they believe conceal the fact that little has actually changed.

Tariq Alhomayed for Asharq-Alawsat lauds Obama for openly addressing the Arab world and discussing important issues that are often ignored by Arab and Muslim leaders. He comments, “Obama’s speech addressed the citizen who desires an education, and wishes [only]

to live with dignity,” and “who abhors extremism, backwardness and attrition.”

He adds that, “the Arab and Islamic publics should have heard what they heard from Obama in all its clarity and openness a long time ago, with regards to the peace [process], the fight against extremism, the right to education and dignity, women’s rights, the issue of minorities, democracy, and other issues.”

Nonetheless, others are disappointed and label Obama’s speech as merely an old disguise in a new form. As Fahmy Howeidy, an Egyptian political analyst, argues in the Egyptian weekly publication, Al-Ahram, “Obama’s impressive rhetoric did not tell us anything about US policies towards pressing issues, particularly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, other than what we already know.”

*“Obama’s speech has arrived, and was welcomed, and now we must ensure that we do not miss any more opportunities, we must take action in a practical and effective manner.”*

*Tariq Alhomayed, Asharq-Alawsat.*

To most news outlets in the Arab world, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains pivotal to the region’s stability and future relations with the US.

Howeidy believes the speech lacks crucial details and references. He claims that Obama’s “mere mention” of the Palestinians’ right to the establishment of a Palestinian state “did not include details on where this land will be, or what its borders will be.”

Abdus Sattar Ghazali, executive editor

of the online magazine American Muslim Perspective, explains to Al-Ahram that the two-state solution offered by Obama has already been rejected by Israel while he has “indirectly urged the Arab states to recognize Israel’s ‘legitimacy’ and did not offer any criticism of Israel, except by saying that he was opposed to new Jewish settlements. But he did not oppose the existing settlements.”

Similarly, Attajdid, an online Moroccan journal, argues that Obama did not address the issue of Jerusalem, the return of refugees or the lifting of the embargo. The online journal also criticized Obama’s speech when he announced that America’s support for Israel will be undeterred.

Alhomayed denounces the critics of Obama and criticizes them for ignoring Obama’s commitment to the right to existence for a Palestinian state. Ahmad Rehab, executive director of the council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-Chicago), stresses the importance of acknowledging Palestine by name rather than talking about the Palestinian territories.

Rehab said that in his use of the word Palestine, “Obama signaled that he is quite serious about a two-state solution in the future.”

According to Fadel Soliman, director of the Cairo-based Bridges Foundation, a body that specializes in introducing Islam to non-Muslims, change is occurring. Soliman argues that, “for the first time, an American president has admitted the historical mistakes of his country, and says clearly that no country in the world has the right to decide who should possess nuclear weapons and who should not; and speaks about his country as a country living among -- and not above -- other countries.”

Dahlia Mujahid told Asharq Al-Awsat, that “President Obama linked America with Europe and the West in general, [but] the US has never killed Muslims in religious wars, rather it has defended them on numerous occasions. Therefore, I believe that the President’s speech neglected this powerful idea, and did not touch upon it at all, and it was possible that this would have had a greater resonance in the Islamic world, sending the message that the President wants.”

“This is the first president we see in the United States that is talking about the Palestinian issue, resolving the Palestinian issue in the first six months

of his presidency. Usually, it’s in the last two months of the presidency.” Saad Hariri, leader of Lebanon’s parliamentary majority told The Associated Press.

Alhomayed invites Arabs and Muslims to take advantage of Obama’s “good gesture.” Alhomayed believes, “Obama’s speech has arrived, and was welcomed, and now we must ensure that we do not miss any more opportunities, we must take action in a practical and effective manner.”

## Obama’s Speech in Cairo Reflects a New Direction of US Foreign Policy

On June 4, 2009, President Obama gave a groundbreaking speech in which he laid out his vision for a new relationship between the US and the Muslim world. Al-Jazeera has referred to Obama’s address in Egypt as a “landmark speech”. In addition, CBS News writes that the speech, “was exceptionally moving and delivered the right message.” Press Secretary Robert Gibbs asserts that the speech is yet another step in the Obama administrations continuous effort to reach out to Muslims who have been alienated by US policies during the last decade. The White House utilized all of its technological and communications influence to ensure that as many people as possible saw Obama’s almost one-hour address.

The White House has employed various new media tools to help disseminate Obama’s important message. According to the Associated Press, the tech-savvy White House sought to reinforce Obama’s message in every way possible, including distributing a transcript in 13 different languages and using Twitter and Facebook to spread the message.

More than 20,000 people outside the US received free text messages about President Obama’s speech to Muslims in Cairo. The text messages, which were part of the State Department’s free message program, helped spread Obama’s words of engagement to countries with predominantly Muslim populations.

The messages were available in Arabic,

Persian, Urdu and English. However, the text-messaging service was not available in the United States because of laws that forbid taxpayer dollars to be used domestically for propaganda.

USA Today reports that Press Secretary Gibbs claims that the effort to disseminate Obama’s speech in Cairo is the administration’s “broadest outreach to date.” Gibbs, explains that the White House additionally set up an event page online at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), where people were able to watch live video and chat at the same time.

The American Free Press declares that President Obama stole the spotlight on television stations across the Middle East. At least 34 Arabic language channels broadcast the keynote address, including channels run by US foes, such as Iran and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

*“While Mr. Obama’s strong words may resonate today, on the Arab street and in the madrassas and the tea shops and dining tables where the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims congregate, the future actions of Mr. Obama will be far more important.”*

*Helene Cooper,  
The New York Times.*

The address is part of an extensive effort by Obama to redirect US foreign policy which, under George Bush, alienated allies and fuelled anti-American sentiment in

the Muslim world. Marwan Bishara, Al Jazeera's senior political analyst, supports that Obama's message did help undo "the harm done by the Bush administration".

The speech further reflects current aims of Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East, such as his attempt to build a coalition of moderate Muslim governments to help renew stalled Middle East peace talks. Obama additionally seeks help from Middle Eastern governments in curbing Iran's nuclear program.

According to the Washington Times, White House deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, Denis McDonough claims that the Cairo speech built on the President's call for a "new comprehensive strategy" aimed at destroying terrorists' base of support. The strategy is focused on countering terrorist "lies" about the US, McDonough says, and to "tell the real story about the country [and] our interests."

However, some specialists of international public diplomacy argue that in his speech Obama missed an opportunity to directly critique the roots of Muslim extremism and to counter its ideology of hate. James Glassman, who left the government in January as Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, claims the speech fell short by failing to offer a new strategic direction.

Mr. Glassman argues that the President should have focused on defeating the small group of violent reactionaries that is trying to force Muslims to adopt a broad, totalitarian doctrine that is not in line with the tenets of Islam.

Additionally, the speech demonstrates a break from traditional US-Israeli relations since it suggests that the US will take a more fair and balanced approach to the conflict. Journalist Sabria Jawhar, from the Huffington Post, explains that for the first time she is "beginning to sense that Israel will be held accountable for its actions and its failure to embrace the two-state solution," because "unlike previous presidents, Obama spoke of 'Palestine'... of Israel's 'daily humiliations' on Palestinians and Israel's 'occupation'" and that "these words can't be dismissed as rhetoric."

Additionally, Ray Hanania, also from the Huffington Post, notes that "this is the first time an American President visiting the Middle East did not make a stop in

Israel, and, did not provide a copy of his major policy address ahead of time to the Israelis." While Arabs may appreciate these signs of increased even-handedness, Obama's message left many Israelis uneasy.

While it is too soon to determine the overall impact of President Obama's speech, the speech is certainly a promising first-step in improving US relations with the Muslim and Arab worlds. Yet, as Gibbs acknowledges, "all our problems and all of our outreach efforts are not going to either be solved or culminated in one speech."

Helene Cooper of The New York Times, further explains that "while Mr. Obama's strong words may resonate today, on the Arab street and in the madrassas and the tea shops and dining tables where the world's 1.5 billion Muslims congregate, the future actions of Mr. Obama will be far more important." President Obama must now prove that his message to Muslims is more than just words by changing US foreign policy.

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