

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Liaison Appointed to Represent US Muslims

Hilary Clinton recently announced on the State Department's website that Farah Pandith will head the newly-created Office of the United States Special Representative to Muslim Communities. The State Department declared, "Special Representative Farah Pandith and her staff will be responsible for executing the Administration's efforts to engage with Muslims around the world on a people-to-people and organizational level."

The creation of this office, three-weeks after Obama's address in Cairo, is part of the Obama Administration's attempt to initiate a new and stronger relationship with the Muslim world. *Al-Jazeera* reports that Pandith will carry-out Obama's agenda for engaging the international Muslim community in constructive dialogues.

In her first official interview on July 8, 2009 with *AltMuslim Comment*, Pandith outlines her role in the new position, her plans to expand her initiatives to Muslim communities, and the opportunities for lateral engagement with Muslim communities worldwide. Pandith explains that her philosophy is "not about the American flag being waved everywhere. It's about us getting to know people and actually listening to what is needed, take action, and develop partnerships."

Pandith served as the Senior Adviser on Muslim engagement in the European and Eurasian region at the State Department. Under the Bush Administration, Pandith led the effort to reach out to the 20 million Muslims in Western Europe. Pandith was prepared to leave her position as the new administration came to office this January, but her proven success won her an appointment as the US Representative

to Muslim Communities by the incoming Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

In Europe, Pandith's outreach extended beyond the traditional methods of exchange programs and iftar dinners at embassies, Pandith tells *AltMuslim Comment*. Rather, she established a partnership for engagement between the private sector, public sector and the government through numerous programs.

Pandith, a Muslim American herself, resolutely tried to involve American Muslims in the US' outreach initiatives with the Middle East. In the interview, she discusses a program she created that brought teams of American Muslims to 15 countries in Europe. The teams of four, including an American Muslim student, an imam, and two others, visited a country for 3 or 4 days and participated in round table discussions, town halls and interfaith dialogues.

Pandith plans to continue her outreach to American Muslims under the Obama Administration. She states in the interview, "I want to have consistent dialogue with American Muslims, and I will do that face to face."

In a special briefing at the State Department, Pandith explained that she will apply her experience in Europe to form an innovative and dynamic plan of Muslim engagement for the State Department. She asserted that her outreach efforts will not merely focus on improving the US reputation in Muslim countries, but also on listening to Muslims and "building opportunities for [actual] dialogue." To foster such exchanges of information and understanding, Pandith will establish forums for international dialogue at the grassroots level.

In the briefing, Pandith went on to explain that her office will only concentrate on increasing communication between the US and Muslim communities and will not

address matters of US foreign policy, as this is the responsibility of the US Special Envoy to the Middle East. *The Jerusalem Post* reports that Pandith, the new envoy to the Islamic world, rejects the notion that US foreign policy is the key issue affecting Muslim attitudes toward America and confirms that her new

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initiatives will not attempt to win Muslim hearts and minds to the “US cause.” Indeed, Pandith stresses the diversity of Islam and explains that her approach to engagement will respect the scope and nuances of the world’s Muslim population. As she reiterates, “It’s really... taking the time to listen to what is taking place on the ground so that you understand... what the differences are, even within generations and within ethnicities, so that you’re beginning to build dialogue in different ways and not just use one.”

“It’s about us getting to know people and actually listening to what is needed, take action, and develop partnerships.”

Farah Pandith, United States Special Representative to Muslim Communities.

The Jerusalem Post details that Pandith will initiate a variety of outreach endeavors, “including student exchanges, town hall meetings, entrepreneurial meetings and community projects, calibrated to meet the needs of a diverse and multi-faceted population.”

On a related note, *The Times of India* reports that the people of India overwhelmingly support the appointment of Kashmir-born Pandith to this position. According to *BBC News*, Secretary Clinton believes that Ms. Pandith “sees her personal experience as an illustration of how Muslim immigrants to the US can successfully integrate themselves into American society.”

Israel’s Public Diplomacy Offensive

Ron Dermer, the Israeli Prime Minister’s closest adviser and key policy strategist,

calls attention to the need for a public relations makeover, telling Jason Koutsoukis for the *Sydney Morning Herald* that it is “time Israel switched its PR strategy from defense to offense.”

According to Dermer, who is the Director of Policy Planning and Communications for Israel, the country faces a serious public relations problem among the international community. In response, Dermer proposes an aggressive public diplomacy strategy to tackle these negative perceptions around the world.

Dermer’s perception of Israel’s negative international reputation stems from the fact that, “In the six months since Israel began a 22-day offensive against Hamas in Gaza that killed more than 1,400 Palestinians, the country has faced some of the worst public relations in its 61-year history,” reports Koutsoukis.

Indeed, *The Age* points out, “In the past week alone, there have been harsh criticisms [against Israel] in reports published by the Red Cross, Amnesty International, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and Human Rights Watch.”

Dermer notes that many of these criticisms against Israel come in response to the country’s actions and policies regarding the Palestinian community and ongoing conflict over the land currently occupied by the Israeli settlements.

In addressing these particular concerns, Dermer says, “It is not enough for Israel to say that it wants peace.” Rather, the nation under his new public diplomacy “offensive,” must explicitly affirm that Israel is not a thief of Palestinian land and aims to nullify “the core of this conflict.”

Thus, Dermer wants to focus Israel’s public diplomacy efforts on quashing the “narrative that has grown much stronger in recent years that is essentially false: people . . . see [Israel] as colonialist invaders.”

He suggests that modern media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have crucial roles to play in supplementing an organized public diplomacy campaign to improve Israel’s reputation in the international community, writes the *Brisbane Times*.

Likewise, Israel’s leading public diplomacy expert, Professor Eytan Gilboa of Bar-

Ilan University, agrees, “In terms of power, a properly organized information campaign can be worth several brigades.”

“It is not enough for Israel to say that it wants peace.”

Ron Dremer, Israeli Director of Policy Planning and Communications.

At the same time, Professor Gilboa admits, “The power to persuade and shape understanding, what he calls soft power, is a concept that Israeli governments have never properly understood” how to execute.

While some in Israel’s political arena agree that the country’s reputation needs a facelift, others reject the notion that its image abroad constitutes the real issue.

Uri Dormi, who served as the Director of the Government Press Office under the former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, disagrees with Dermer, saying, “I think Israel has a policy problem, not a PR problem.” He goes on to blame Israel’s insistent and continued presence in the West Bank as reason for its negative reputation, suggesting that only a change in policy will truly improve its international relations.

Despite critics’ cries for policy changes, the Israeli government seems to be improving its ability to exercise soft power, increasingly supporting Dermer’s stronger public diplomacy efforts aimed mainly at Middle East and European communities, reports Arnaud de Borchgrave for the *Washington Times*.

Michael B. Oren, the country’s newest ambassador to the United States, also works on maintaining a positive relationship with the Obama administration. According to de Borchgrave, Oren’s main focus “is to ensure that little if any daylight passes between US and Israeli positions on the perennial Palestinian-Israeli issue and on what most Israelis regard as the coming existential threat of Iran’s nuclear weapons.”

In spite of President Obama's criticisms of Israel's policies with regard to Palestinians and the Iranian threat, the country appears to have favorably received US Vice President Joseph Biden's remarks a week ago that reiterated, "Israel can determine for itself – it's a sovereign nation – what's in their interests and what they decide to do relative to Iran or anyone else. . . . Whether or not we [the US] agree or not," writes *the Times*.

Regardless of whether Biden truly intended to give the country a green light for taking action against Iran, Israel is clearly committed to protecting itself and its image in the world.

Indeed, the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently reported on its joint project with the Neaman Institute to devise a comprehensive policy to shape the country's future public diplomacy strategy. Therefore, it is no surprise that Israel, under the direction of Ron Dermer, is committing more of its economic, political and academic resources to proactively reimagining itself in an increasingly skeptical, critical and connected world.

Al-Jazeera English Expands in North America

Through a deal with MHz Networks, *Al-Jazeera* English (AJE) launched in the Washington, DC area on July 1, reports *Menassat*. The release will allow 2.3 million more subscribers to access the Doha-based news outlet, adding to the 140 million households who already watch AJE worldwide.

Though AJE is reported to be a top news choice for the military and has developed a reputation for being a reliable alternative to US and European news outlets, it has previously only been available in two US markets – Burlington, VT and Toledo, OH – because of its association with *Al-Jazeera's* Arabic news channel, states *Menassat*.

Al-Jazeera's Director General, Wadah Khanfar, claims that it is the "benevolent political climate" under President Obama that has lessened the fears of cable providers and that "starting now, we will have a

growing audience in the United States."

With the release of AJE in Washington, the network has the potential to affect significant change in US-Arab relations, claims Mohamed Elmenhawy of *The Daily Star*. Cable access will be a big opportunity for AJE, providing the opportunity to foster understanding between the US and the Arab world.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) is also reviewing an application by *Al-Jazeera* English for permission to broadcast in Canada. *The Star* reports that the Commission has received varied public commentary on AJE's application.

Tony Burman, Managing Director of *Al-Jazeera* English, was pleased that most opinions in Canada have been favorable, and described those comments in opposition to AJE as having more to do with its Arabic-language sister station.

"Starting now, we will have a growing audience in the United States."

Wadah Khanfar, Director General of Al-Jazeera.

Bernie Farber, Head of the Canadian Jewish Congress, accused *Al-Jazeera* Arabic of spreading "clear outright anti-Semitic Holocaust denial," according to *Israel National News*. However, Burman was able to quell Farber's fears by dissociating AJE from the Arabic network, in spite of their shared parent company, resources and brand name.

Most opposition to broadcasting AJE in Canada takes aim at the skewed perspective of *Al-Jazeera* Arabic, according to Howard Elliott of *the Spec*. However, he argues that any wrongdoings by *Al-Jazeera* in the past have been limited to the Arab-speaking network, which is independent of the English division.

Elliott claims that AJE is no more agenda-driven than other mainstream

English-speaking networks such as Fox News, CNN and CBC.

The expansion of *Al-Jazeera* English follows the trend of the increased demand across the US and Canada for greater diversity and international perspective in the news. Phil Lawrie, Director of Global Distribution for *Al-Jazeera* said, "We know there is a great demand in the United States for AJE's groundbreaking news and current affairs programming," reports *Menassat*.

According to *Broadband TV News*, AJE is now available on the iCast news portal, a platform that delivers news video to smart phones and the web.

The network has also struck a deal with Channel Islam International (CII), giving the radio station exclusive rights and access to *Al-Jazeera's* reporter network, write *the Times*.

Zahid Asmal, spokesman for CII, told *the Times* that "with the launch of this partnership, radio audiences in South Africa and around the world will enjoy *Al-Jazeera's* insightful, cutting-edge reporting, which has proved popular across the world."

With *Al-Jazeera* English's increasing recognition and worldwide outreach, Elmenhawy notes that being picked up by major US cable providers marks a cultural shift, especially after being denied in November 2006.

However, he states that because the new Obama Administration seeks cooperation and understanding between the US and the Arab and Muslim worlds, *Al-Jazeera* must follow suit to promote a constructive dialogue. Thus, to compete with CNN or NBC, AJE must make improvements to extend coverage beyond the immediate concerns of the Middle East and provide insight into domestic US politics, as well.

After the launch in Washington, along with the application in Canada and Khanfar's plans to break into the New York City market, *Al-Jazeera* English is expanding its outreach and is well on its way to creating a name for itself as a reliable news source, on par with other major international media outlets.

Controversy Surrounds Suspension of Emirati Newspaper

Following a defamation case, Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeals issued on July 6 and upheld a decree suspending the Arabic daily newspaper *Al-Emarat Al-Youm* and its website for twenty days, reports *Gulf News*. *Gulf News* notes that both Sami Al-Riyami, Editor-in-Chief of *Al-Emarat Al-Youm*, and Abdul Latif Al-Sayegh, Publisher and Chairman of the Arab Media Group, were each fined Dh20, 000 (about \$5,400) in a case raised by Warsan Stables' owners.

The lawsuit stemmed from an article published in October 2006 accusing Warsan Stables of giving steroids to horses during a race in Abu Dhabi. Mohammad Yousuf, Chairman of the UAE Journalists' Association, told *Gulf News* that media circles were disturbed by the suspension, especially since UAE media is witnessing a qualitative leap in development.

Al-Emarat Al-Youm has often been accused of practicing tabloid journalism for exposing many issues considered taboo for Emiratis. *Gulf News* points out that in fact, numerous media observers and readers appreciate the paper as a bold and indispensable voice for Emirates, as it is one of the few publications run by locals rather than foreigners.

Beginning in January 2008, the trial lasted for months before a court in Abu Dhabi ruled in favor of Warsan Stables. Subsequently, the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeals upheld the decision of the lower court, and based their ruling on a 1980 press law which allows courts to suspend publications and impose criminal penalties.

Yousuf noted, "The judge has to abide by the law, and unfortunately, publication and publishing law No 15 for 1980 states suspension, closure and withdrawal of license as punishment, and so does the draft media activities law approved by the Federal National Council (FNC) on January 20th."

The suspension of the newspaper clashes with the self-perpetuated vision

of the UAE as a more liberal state. Yousuf commented that suspending the newspaper will cause damage to the UAE's reputation among international freedom and human rights organizations, which may take advantage of this ruling to accuse the country of free press violations.

"We are disappointed by the Federal Supreme Court's decision to uphold the suspension of Al-Emarat Al-Youm."

*Mohamed Abdel Dayem,
Committee to Protect
Journalists Program
Coordinator for the Middle
East and North Africa.*

"However, liability in cases of opinion, expression and publishing must be limited to four rules: correction, apology, fine and compensation," Yousuf added. "We are disappointed by the Federal Supreme Court's decision to uphold the suspension of *Al-Emarat Al-Youm*," said Mohamed Abdel Dayem, Committee to Protect Journalists' (CPJ) Program Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Not only does this suspension deprive the public from information but it also illustrates the inadequacy of the UAE's media law," he stated.

In January, the Federal National Council approved a draft of a new media ruling to replace the 1980 law that is currently stands. The draft awaits approval from Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, before it can become law.

CPJ called on Sheikh Khalifa to reject the law because it imposes harsh penalties for vaguely-defined press violations, including the suspension of publications

for a minimum of six months, permanent revocation of publishing licenses, and fines as high as Dh5,000,000 (US\$1,361,000).

Since then, the newspaper has not been publishing and its website is showing a blank page, reports *Menassat*. Communication with the newspaper is no longer possible and sections merely affiliated with the paper have disappeared as well.

On the issue of freedom of expression and of the press, the administration, editorial management, and owners took a surprising stance – one which was contrary to that expected from media workers. None of these parties objected to the court's decision or mentioned its effects on freedom of speech and the press in Dubai, which claims to be the media hub of the Gulf.

According to Human Rights Watch, this omission is a step backward in gaining press freedoms in the UAE. "Even if the article was not accurate, shutting down the newspaper for three weeks is totally disproportionate and a serious attack on press freedom," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East Director at Human Rights Watch.

Superheroes Become Super Diplomats

The 99, a team of superheroes based on Islamic culture and religion, may soon join forces with Justice League characters from DC comics such as Batman and Wonder Woman, reports *The Telegraph*.

The Kuwaiti comics, which sell about one million copies a year, are already popular in the Middle East and have an animated film commissioned. Moreover, the first of several 99-based theme parks have opened in Kuwait and appear to be early successes.

What will unfold from the collaboration between DC Comics in the US and Teshkeel Comics in Kuwait is yet to be seen, but the appearance of The 99 alongside archetypal American heroes would have been arguably unlikely under the Bush Administration. DC Comics' President and Publisher, Paul Levitz, believes the

cross-cultural project is unprecedented.

“This is a nice step forward. The most difficult creative test is when you are working with the least precedent and when you’re trying to reach an audience that has a different cultural bias and different interests,” he remarks.

“Enemy number one is fear.”

Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, creator of The 99.

Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, creator of The 99 and founder of Teshkeel Media, said he was initially unsure of the direction the mini-series would take. He adds, “Enemy number one is fear. You could open it with Obama’s speech [in Cairo] with the two sets of superheroes watching it and having different reactions. There are plenty of possibilities.” Comic book aficionados have mainly responded positively to the news, although questions have arisen about how Wonder Woman’s skimpy costume will fare in the Middle East, notes *The Guardian*. One fan suggests that she may be colored differently so as to appear dressed.

A few critics accuse DC Comics of betraying the US: “Muslim-pandering, anyone? Thank you, Time Warner, for showing us whose side you’re on. I guess we can add you to the list of traitorous companies who have forgotten 9/11,” quotes *The Guardian*.

Unlike most of their Western counterparts, The 99 characters are ordinary people who develop extraordinary abilities after being infused with wisdom and power. Only one of the five female characters is fully covered, Batina.

With regard to 99’s potential obstacles in the region, Levitz comments, “It’s difficult to have any kind of reading or comic book culture here because there is a lot of stuff that doesn’t come in or it’s censored. Certain storylines don’t work and some stuff, like magic, just isn’t allowed.”

The 99’s creator, Al-Muttawa, explains in a letter to his sons written for the BBC

how the comic was designed to show the world the tolerant and peaceful face of Islam. He explains how after working with victims of torture by adulated dictators, and having tried to reconcile modernity with Islam, he took up the pen to bring forth a new message post-9/11.

“The [name] 99 references The 99 attributes of Allah - generosity, mercy, wisdom and dozens of others not used to describe Islam in the media when you were growing up,” he remarks to his boys and the BBC audience.

The powers of The 99 come from the books of the Dar Al-Hikma library of Baghdad, which was sacked in 1258. The books allegedly were from all the world’s cultures and religions.

“I told the writers of the animation that only when Jewish kids think that The 99 characters are Jewish, and Christian kids think they’re Christian, and Muslim kids think they’re Muslim, and Hindu kids think they’re Hindu, that I will consider my vision as having been fully executed,” he adds.

“Overall views of the United States and its role in the world remain about as negative as before Obama’s election.”

The annual WorldPublicOpinion.org survey.

Promoting the values of cooperation and partnership, Al-Muttawa concludes that such ideals are pivotal to the success of The 99. He ends, “Only a father’s love could have created The 99.”

Obama’s Popularity Yet to Improve US Image

Real diplomatic change demands follow-up, amplification and explanation, comments former editor John Hughes for the *Christian Science Monitor*. Foreign audiences require interpretation of US government policies and insight into the American way of life and love of freedom, he continues.

How best to reinvigorate public diplomacy became a critical discussion after 9/11, and the need to project accurate information about the US to Arab countries and others became urgent again. Hughes remarks that during the Bush Administration, public diplomacy suffered from a procession of undersecretaries; State Department officials say the office has been vacant about 40 percent of the time since 2001.

Optimistically, the Obama Administration succeeded in getting its choice for undersecretary confirmed by the US Senate: Judith McHale. She inherits an operation sadly understaffed and short on resources, according to a recent report on public diplomacy by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). Complaints that bureaucratic tasks disrupt actual public diplomacy remain a challenge to be met by this incoming undersecretary.

While theoretically, the State Department is the lead agency in public diplomacy, the Obama White House has set-up the Global Engagement Directorate to “leverage diplomacy, communications, and international development,” explains Hughes.

In light of these strides toward transparency and outreach, President Obama has become one of the most popular world leaders, while America still fares low in world public opinion polls, according to Howard LaFranchi for the *Christian Science Monitor*.

The annual WorldPublicOpinion.org survey, coordinated by the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), which represents about two-third of the world’s population, found that as popular as Obama may be, “overall views of the United States

and its role in the world remain about as negative as before his election.”

Throughout his campaign for the presidency, Obama often cited mending America’s global image as a key task for any incoming administration.

Unfortunately, this poll finds a more “nuanced” picture. “General views of the US are still mixed,” says Steven Kull, PIPA director and the poll’s manager. Contrasting Obama’s overall positive rating of 61 percent to a 39 percent “mostly positive” score for the US, he adds, “Putting it all together, there’s only modest movement” upward for America’s global image.

Kull finds evidence that Obama’s strategy of making major speeches to selected global audiences on their turf is having an impact. He points to Turkey, where opinions of the US remain very mixed, but noticeably improved after Obama’s April speech in Ankara. Randa Slim, a visiting scholar at the US Institute of Peace in Washington, says she suspects only a “pause” in generally negative trends for the US in Muslim countries. It will take actual deeds – in terms of settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and promoting democracy in Arab countries – for the pause to translate into wider confidence in America’s intentions and policies, she adds.

“If [Obama] cannot deliver in a short period of time at least a minor success” – she offers a freeze on Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories as an example – “this period of time is not going to last long.”

But on average, only one in four people agree that the US is “an important leader in promoting international laws and sets a good example by following them,” while two-thirds say “the US tries to promote international laws for other countries, but is hypocritical because it does not follow these rules itself,” according to the survey by World Public Opinion.

Despite Obama’s speech in Ankara in early April, 72 percent of Turks say the US is playing a mainly negative role, as well as majorities in Pakistan (69%), Egypt (67%), Iraq (53%), which are countries that remain pivotal to US foreign policy.

To reverse such negative opinions of the US, the Obama Administration must

not only rely on its leader’s name, but on his ability to following through on tough policies aimed at improving US relations with Muslim-majority countries.

Social Media not All It’s ‘Blogged’ Up to Be

In an editorial for *Gulf News*, journalist Faisal Al-Qasim observes that when Iranian authorities imposed heavy restrictions on traditional news reporters in the aftermath of their recent controversial election, social networking sites were one of the few successful ways to spread news both within and outside of Iran.

“In the end, we care about something, we desire something and through blogging we call for change.”

Fuad Al-Farhan, blogger.

Qasim claims that the strength of amateur (or citizen) reporting via cell phones and the internet lies in the potential for a large number of participants to be involved in circumventing a regime’s attempt to censor the spread of information.

“Security services can detain a young man using his mobile, but they certainly cannot detain the thousands of people who have mobiles and are ready to use them,” he writes.

Nevertheless, progressive bloggers in the Middle East still often face persecution and other forms of retribution, especially in ultra-conservative countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran. In an article on MSNBC, writer Asma Al-Sharif refers to a “rare gathering of bloggers”

in the liberal Saudi city of Jeddah.

“Now for the first time we, as individuals in our society, have this power in our hands to call for change,” proclaimed one blogger at the meeting. However, Al-Sharif points out that many bloggers fear of being reprimanded by the state if they speak out against official policy, especially regarding particularly sensitive issues such as Islam.

Al-Sharif also highlights a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists that condemns Saudi Arabia as one of the most restricted countries for bloggers; as the government often detains, monitors and blocks writers it labels contentious.

Despite these dangers, blogger Fuad Al-Farhan shared at the meeting that his own motivations for blogging far outweighed the potential retribution he might incur as a result of the rebellious behavior. “In the end, we care about something, we desire something and through blogging we call for change.”

Thankfully, many blogs in the Middle East are filling “a gaping and shameful hole in the dominant news industry, allowing for freedom of speech and expression that is all too often censored by repressive political regimes,” remarked new media pioneer and Professor Mark Comerford to *Menassat* journalist Jasmine Elnadeem.

In the same vein, the Merriam-Webster Collegiate dictionary acknowledged the influence of the internet in globalization through its recent vocabulary additions, such as “vlog” (a video blog), reports *Times of the Internet*.

Therefore, in spite of the implicit dangers which accompany social networking and blogging in censored states, many Arabs continue to reevaluate the risks against the seeming successes of contributing to this new media trend. Only with time will they know whether their decisions to post or not to post were worth the gamble.

Poll Shows Censorship Remains Main Obstacle for Journalists

Arab journalists continue to view censorship as one of the greatest obstructions to free reporting in the Middle East, according to a recent survey by MediaSource/Insight Middle East, reports *Arabian Business*. The survey of 219 Arabic and English-language journalists working in the region found that they feel under greater pressure, as government censorship increases and advertising revenues decline amid the global economic downturn.

The article also states that the polled journalists “cited government rules and regulations at top of the list of hindrances to...writing stories.”

“Our experience as part of the opposition...made us think that the independent press was a foundation for democracy and freedoms.”

*Salem, Mohammad Ould
Mohammad Imbarak,
General Secretary of a
Mauritanian opposition
party.*

Al-Jazeera Director General Wadah Khanfar agrees that government and self-imposed censorship still runs rampant throughout the Middle East, he told interviewer Soren Billing of *Arabian Business*. The Arabic-language media outlet broke barriers when it emerged in 1996 as a news service willing to criticize Arab governments and report on traditionally taboo issues such as women’s rights, Billing writes.

But now, over a decade after the initial launch of *Al-Jazeera*, Khanfar says that censorship and the fear of reprisal has not lessened, and in fact may be worse. *Al-Jazeera’s* liberal approach

to reporting paved the way for other Arab journalists who have since become more outspoken and critical.

“I must say that this new attitude, which is in my opinion very positive and people are used to it now, is not at all convincing governments to open up,” Khanfar told Billing. “It is actually putting governments in a position where they are trying more and more to silence voices and they are sometimes inventing new laws and regulations to work against the freedom of journalists.”

This view is reinforced by a report from the *Palestinian News Network* that claims there was a significant increase in “violations of media freedoms” in the Palestinian territories during the month of June. The article details specific violations such as arrests, prison sentences, and personal harassment, mainly perpetrated by military or police forces.

Restrictions on freedom of the press in the Middle East have also been augmented by the current global economic crisis, which has contributed to the decline of independent news sources, says Mohammad Salem in a two-part series for *Menassat*. Mauritania’s only printing press, the sole source for non-state sponsored news, is facing huge financial difficulties and will likely be forced to close.

In an interview with Salem, Mohammad Ould Mohammad Imbarak, General Secretary of a Mauritanian opposition party, said that, “freedom and openness in Mauritania have always been tied to the freedom of the press.”

“The media has contributed to enhancing democracy by allowing the different political parties to express and defend their beliefs,” he continues. “Our experience as part of the opposition...made us think that the independent press was a foundation for democracy and freedoms.”

But at least one Arab news source is actually expanding, says Lyn Cockburn at the *Edmonton Sun*. *Al-Jazeera* will launch its English-language news service on Canadian television this year, after a previous attempt to broadcast in Canada was thwarted by protests from Jewish groups.

In her editorial, Cockburn says that while the expansion won’t be without growing pains, *Al-Jazeera* is still a

much-needed addition to Canadian network television news. She points out that viewers always have a choice to “switch channels” if they disagree with *Al-Jazeera* or any other news source.

In addition, Cockburn observes that *Al-Jazeera* might be a healthy counterpoint to Fox News, the American network often criticized for its conservative and sometimes purposefully inflammatory commentators.

In a show of support for freedom of all press, she writes, “I don’t want either channel censored. I do however, want them discussed, debated and outed if necessary.”

Journalism in Economic Peril

More than 100 Mideast-based magazines have shut down since the start of the global financial crisis due to dwindling advertising revenues, reports *Business Maktoob*. A survey conducted by Media Source, a research firm, noted the UAE was the worst hit country, where 74 titles had either been closed or suspended.

The MediaSource/Insight Middle East Journalist Survey 2009 canvassed the opinions of 219 journalists working for Arabic and English-language print, broadcast and online media in thirteen countries across the Middle East, covering topics ranging from press releases, press conferences, public relations practice, the sources journalists use for stories, and the current state of journalism in the region.

The companies, including Abu Dhabi Media Co (ADMC) and Arab Media Group (AMG), formed a committee to tackle the problem, according to the news site.

“We can extend payment dates but discounts are out of the question. This is not legally binding but a gentlemen’s agreement,” Mohamed Al-Mulla, AMG group executive director, was quoted as saying in reference to unpaid advertising fees.

A collapse in advertising revenues, which leads to title closures, redundancies and recruitment freezes, has left the region’s reporters feeling increasingly

under pressure. Nevertheless, government rules and regulations have emerged as the greatest barrier to journalists covering the stories the way they would like, reports *AME Info*.

“One of the most significant differences revealed by the 2009 survey is that journalists are receiving, and using, more press releases than they did two years ago,” notes James Mullan, joint managing partner of the media training consulting firm, Insight.

Traditional media appears to have mixed feelings about the impact of social media such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter on news journalism. The survey found 62% of Arabic and 74% of English-language journalists view the role of social media as a source of information in a neutral or negative light, yet they admit it provides greater interaction with diverse media audiences.

A number of media organizations already utilize social media outlets to compose stories, while 55% of Arabic and 37% of English-language respondents say their media organizations aren't using it but think they should. Interestingly, only 7% of Arabic and 13% of English respondents believe social media is “a waste of time.”

The survey also found that the majority of the English-language press (63%) thinks the quality of regional journalism is improving (a drop from 80% in 2007), while only 44% of the Arabic press agrees, 28% says it is “staying the same,” and 28% believe it is “getting worse.”

Overall, both regions of journalists perceive undue “government rules and regulations” as the central obstacle to enjoying complete press freedom.

Thus, Oliver Blofeld, managing partner at Insight, sums up the value of this survey, pointing out that it helps “PR practitioners better understand the concerns, frustrations and pressures placed on journalists” across the globe.

National Geographic Channel Launches

in Abu Dhabi

AME Info reports that the National Geographic Company and the Abu Dhabi Media Company (ADMC) have partnered to launch free-to-air National Geographic Channel Abu Dhabi, which will be the first international factual entertainment channel to be broadcast in the Arabic language. National Geographic Channel Abu Dhabi will feature science and technology entertainment programming, as well as documentaries on animals, nature, exploration and culture.

“Our children’s future and our grandchildren’s future depend [sic] on a seismic shift in our attitudes toward our planet. This is integral to the National Geographic brand and also integral to the Abu Dhabi and UAE agenda.”

Edward Borgerding, Chief Executive of Abu Dhabi Media Company.

Designed to meet the preferences of the region’s viewers, the channel will offer programming between 6 and 9pm (UAE) that will rotate between three different themes: Nat Geo Science, Wildlife, and MEGA, which will “showcase the world’s most breathtaking megastructures [sic], megacities, megafactories, and megamovers.”

Primetime programming, 10pm-12am Sunday-Thursday, will showcase programs

with a changing genre each night.

These programs include one-offs like the “Incredible Human Machine” on Nat Geo Science and “Dangerous Encounters” on Nat Geo Action. Viewers can also interact with the channel online via the website, www.natgeotv.ae.

The website will include a comprehensive TV schedule, online games designed to encourage people to think about the planet, a community section where viewers can “ask the experts” or contribute to online polls and competitions, and a video player where viewers can expect to see program highlights and reviews.

The National Geographic Channel now reaches out to 305m homes in 165 countries, in 34 languages and is a joint venture between the non-profit National Geographic Society and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation.

Ward Platt, the President for the Pacific, Asia, and the Middle East regions of National Geographic Channels International, notes that “National Geographic Channel Abu Dhabi marks the first time the National Geographic Channel has been broadcast on a free-to-air basis anywhere in the world,” quoted *The National*.

Platt also stated that as opposed to most other markets where a subscription is required, National Geographic Channel Abu Dhabi will generate revenue solely from advertising. The channel builds on ADMC’s existing relationship with the National Geographic Society through the partnership of its film fund, Imagination Abu Dhabi, with National Geographic films. Karim Sarkis, the Executive Director of Broadcast for ADMC, said that the Company eventually plans to offer a version of the channel in High-Definition.

ADMC chairman Mohamed Khalaf Al Mazrouei, as quoted by *C21 Media*, said the channel launch “Represents a very significant opportunity for us in Abu Dhabi to capture such a largely underserved market segment, and is the ideal launch for Abu Dhabi to attain its position as the Middle East’s centre for media.”

Edward Borgerding, the Chief Executive of ADMC, described his organization’s attraction to the channel in a quote from *the National*: “Our children’s future and

our grandchildren's future depend [sic] on a seismic shift in our attitudes toward our planet. This is integral to the National Geographic brand and also integral to the Abu Dhabi and UAE agenda."

Platt, went on to say that the channel's target audience "tends to be of a higher education level and higher income level, and also... more inspirational in general." He noted that "even if [the audience is] in the middle-income level, they tend to have aspiration. So it's certainly a very desirable target audience."

Hamas Unapologetic over Anti-Israeli Cartoon

Hamas recently released a cartoon on Al-Aqsa satellite channel depicting the capture and imprisonment of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured in a cross-border raid in 2006, according to *Xinbuanet*.

The three minute video was criticized for its use of children as actors in the inhumane treatment of Shalit. Imad Zaqout, Programs Director at Al-Aqsa channel, defended the video, saying "it comically meant to remind [people] that there are 11,000 Palestinian prisoners that no one looks after, unlike Shalit who is always remembered in international circles."

Zaqout acknowledged that the West often condemned his channel for involving children, but claimed "The West is fed up by using children this way but is not fed up by the killing of the children in Gaza Strip."

While the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been begging the US to build a counter to Hamas TV, Richard Shulman of the *Examiner* claims that the PA propagates a denunciation of the US, EU and Israel and drives many Arabs to join Hamas.

Shulman writes, "The P.A. media indoctrinates its people with the notions that Israelis are war criminals, colonialists, land thieves, cowards, vampires, [and] child-killers, with whom peace cannot be made."

While Hamas has been bashed for inciting hatred through the media, the group has recently been accused of

harassing a female journalist, reports Paul Kujawsky of the *Examiner*. He argues that Hamas is replicating "the inhumane social conditions of Taliban Afghanistan or Wahabi Saudi Arabia."

Asma al-Ghoul, female journalist in Gaza, became exceptional and known for not wearing a Muslim headscarf. During an outing at the beach, the Hamas Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice harassed her for not wearing a hijab, followed her home, took her identity card and beat the men who accompanied her.

While in her house, the Hamas members looked for her laptop in order to destroy it, suggesting that they were much more interested in targeting her critical journalistic voice than her attire.

Al-Ghoul, after receiving numerous death threats, has relegated herself to her home, but continues deriding the actions of Hamas, proclaiming, "The government has attached themselves to the most extreme facets of Islam, not to Islam as it has been practiced in the past. These morality police think they are god," reports the *Examiner*.

"[The trials] have been completely closed, which is quite unfortunate, because the flawed nature of the trials would have been much more readily apparent."

Sarah Whitson, Middle East director of Human Rights Watch.

As Hamas continues to cross the line with propagating hatred and shocking the world with its gruesome children's shows, they demand media freedom

for themselves but for no one else. In the case of al-Ghoul, it was obvious to analysts such as Kujawsky, that Hamas simultaneously punishes liberal journalism but supports forms of propaganda "hate-TV" against Israel, the US and the EU.

Al-Qaeda's First Trial in Saudi Arabia

A Saudi Arabian court, in a single trial, issued verdicts against 330 members of Al-Qaeda, reports *Bloomberg News*. The detainees were put on trial for belonging to a "deviant group," a term Saudi officials frequently use to refer to Al-Qaeda. *Bloomberg News* claims that the state-owned Saudi Press Agency declared that the suspects are being charged for financing terrorism and threatening national security.

According to *The Telegraph*, the Saudi Bureau of Investigation and General Prosecution announced that the court had been presented with "incriminating evidence of ... dangerous acts and proof that every defendant has carried out the charges against him."

CNN reports that the court issued a range of "preliminary sanctions," including one death sentence as well as various imprisonments, travel restrictions and house arrests. *Al-Arabiya* declares that the men accused include religious clerics such as Nasser Al-Fahd, Ali al-Khodeir and Faris Al-Shuweil, who all publicly backed the militants.

The trial is historically significant because it is the country's first formal terrorism trial. The trial shows that the Kingdom has become more open to addressing its problem with terrorism; an issue that *The Telegraph* maintains is particularly delicate because Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 men who hijacked planes on September 11, 2001.

The terrorist trials are part of Saudi Arabia's increased efforts to fight terrorism. *Bloomberg News* explains that last October, Saudi Arabia's interior minister, Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, stated that the kingdom would put on trial 991 suspected Al-Qaeda members. Saudi security forces have stepped-up their fight against Al-Qaeda since militants struck an oil complex

in the Gulf city of al-Khobar in an effort to destabilize the ruling al-Saud family.

As *The Telegraph* further explains, terrorists have staged more than 30 attacks in Saudi Arabia since May 2003 and the state claims to have foiled a further 160 attacks. Thus far, 90 civilians and 74 security forces have been killed in terrorist attacks.

Reuters, however, states that according to Human Rights Watch, the many of the trials may not meet international standards, as between 2,000 and 3,000 people were detained without charge. CNN cites Sarah Whitson, the organization's Middle East director, as claiming that the Saudi government already broke an initial promise to allow outside observers into the trials.

According to Whitson, the trials "have been completely closed, which is quite unfortunate, because the flawed nature of the trials would have been much more readily apparent," had international observers been present. She further argues that the defendants faced "very vague" charges with limited access to lawyers.

Furthermore, Human Rights Watch challenges the legitimacy of the Kingdom's re-education programs, which released 1,500 men without trial. The program in question, the Munasaha, Arabic for "advice," is a rehabilitation program in which the Saudi government enrolls repentant terrorists and returnees from Guantanamo or militant camps, reports *Al-Arabiya*. The program has been examined as a model for similar programs in the UK and Canada. Dr. Mohammed Alnjami, a member of the Islamic Fiqh Academy in Riyadh, tells *Al-Arabiya* that the judicial ruling does not indicate that the government's rehabilitation program for extremists and Al-Qaeda suspects has failed, since the vast majority has been rehabilitated and only a minority had to stand trial. Likewise, he confirmed that all those convicted will be able to appeal the decision.

Saudi Women Still Have a Long Fight Ahead

Contrary to statements made by the Saudi Arabian government, Saudi women still

must prove they have permission from their male guardians to receive basic health care and education services, as well as to leave the country, indicates a recent report by Human Rights Watch.

As recently as June 2009 at a hearing of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, Saudi officials publicly deny the existence of *The Guardianship* system, in which women over 45 must have either written or verbal permission from a male relative to perform a number of basic activities.

Yet, the report cites an article published in Saudi *Al-Watan* in which Saudi doctors have said that "Health Ministry regulations still require a woman to obtain permission from her male guardian to undergo elective surgery."

"The Saudi government is saying one thing to the Human Rights Council...but doing another thing inside the kingdom," said Sarah Leah Witson, Human Rights Watch's Middle East director. "It needs to stop requiring adult women to seek permission from men, not just pretend" that *The Guardianship* system is obsolete.

Sebastian Usher of *BBC News* reiterates the Saudi government's party line, that male guardianship is not considered a part of Islamic law, and that steps are being taken to abolish it.

Similarly, some Saudi women note that they are comfortable with their status in society, and do not feel that their rights are being impinged upon by the degree of separation that exists between men and women, Usher notes.

Nevertheless, a large discrepancy remains between official government policy and the realities of life for many women in Saudi Arabia, such as Wajeha Al-Huwaider, a well-known women's rights activist who was stopped at the Saudi Arabian border three times late last month for trying to cross into nearby Bahrain without permission from her male guardian, reports CNN.

Al-Huwaider urges women in Saudi Arabia to defy *The Guardianship* system by attempting to cross the border without any sort of express permission from their male family members.

"Either you treat us like mature citizens or you let us leave the country

(permanently)," Al-Huwaider exclaims.

Al-Huwaider insists that equalizing the status of women with that of men is necessary in overturning the antiquated system of gender-based inequalities in a country that insists on denying women the right to vote or drive.

"It's not about just sending messages and petitions anymore... We're not going to send letters to anyone. Saudi women have to find someone who will take them to an airport or a border and say that they don't approve of the system and that they want to leave."

In related news, Dr. Nadia El-Awady, the former Managing Editor of *IslamOnline*'s Health and Science Section, recently became the first Muslim woman elected as President of the World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ), writes Mohammad Yahia for *IslamOnline*.

El-Awady, an Egyptian, was appointed to the position two weeks ago during the biannual World Conference of Science Journalists held in London.

According to Yahia's article, the World Federation of Science Journalists "is a non-profit organization acting as an umbrella network of national, regional, and international associations of science journalists and...communicators."

El-Awady says that she plans to focus on promoting science journalism in some of the countries in which the WFSJ has not been very active in recent years, such as in Russia.

El-Awady served as the WFSJ's board treasurer since 2007, when she became the first Muslim board member. She previously worked as a staff writer and as deputy editor for *IslamOnline*.

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