

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Social Media Taking the Lead in Public Diplomacy

In a White House Press Briefing on July 15 by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs, Judith McHale, discussed new initiatives by the State Department focusing on social media. McHale salutes it as a “model of creative public diplomacy for the 21st century” that embodies Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s vision of using smart power technology to engage nontraditional audiences.

The aim is to send highlights of major Presidential speeches via text message and email to subscribers throughout the world in order to “create and sustain the kind of global dialogue [...] that makes America a smarter and stronger nation,” declared McHale.

She explained that the strategy compliments the President’s aim to re-engage with citizens around the world. The key is to continue providing valuable content and information, and to welcome citizens into a global dialogue.

However, blogger JJ Johnson⁴⁷ explains that Gibbs remains doubtful of the efficiency of such a program, as the State Department has a poor record of maintaining embassy contacts around the world. “Most diplomats have neither the skill nor the software to track their relationship with host-country nationals of interest,” writes the blogger, implying that there is no way to assess if

the people received the message.

Social media offer built-in measures of success (number of comments, number of those who sign up for messages, etc.), but these statistics often produce unreliable numbers.

Philip Seib of the Huffington Post notes that US Public Diplomacy still lacks coherence and influence, despite the popularity of President Obama. Seib explains, “A simple definition of “public diplomacy” is a government (and some non-state actors) reaching out to foreign publics, rather than confining itself to the government-to-government communication of traditional diplomacy.”

He asserts that the Obama Administration so far has failed to come out of the Cold-War model, assuming that the world “yearns for information from the US.” This is no longer the case today, especially in the Arab world where major networks such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya enjoy widespread credibility. In contrast, Seib points out that American efforts, such as Al-Hurra, go unheeded in the region.

Seib highlights, “US public diplomacy, grounded in enlightened policy, must be rebuilt, and not just for the Middle East.” The success of US public diplomacy initiatives relies heavily on listening to other nations, and will require a creative approach to and an acknowledgment of the rise of virtual states on the internet.

“Virtual states must be engaged through a virtual public diplomacy that features sophisticated understanding of religious and cultural sensitivities

as well as the politics and technologies of the moment,” he concludes.

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DoD Focuses on Greater Outreach

The Undersecretary of Defense for Policy at Pentagon, Michele Flournoy, is currently gathering a small team composed of about five existing policy shop employees, Defense News.

The team is to be headed by Rosa Brooks, principal adviser to Flournoy and former Los Angeles Times columnist, to improve overall coordination of Department of Defense (DoD) public diplomacy and strategic communication efforts. The team's purpose will be to help the Obama Administration achieve greater outreach to key populations abroad, such as in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“DoD has a statutory obligation to support public diplomacy.”

Army Lt. Col. Jonathan Withington.

Flournoy disbanded the Support to Public Diplomacy office this year, seeking a fresh start to Strategic Communications efforts after the office became embroiled in an internal conflict over its issuances, according to the blog Mendstate.

While the idea seems a step backward, the Mendstate remarks that it is a step towards better coordination of strategic communication initiatives. As the US tries to shape its global presence to positively affect and stabilize international audiences, it must also be cognizant of the delivery of its communication endeavors.

“The team will lead internal Pentagon

coordination of public diplomacy and strategic communications efforts, and it will collaborate with similar offices across Washington's national security apparatus,” explained a source at Pentagon in an interview with Defense News.

Army Lt. Col. Jonathan Withington concurred, “This team will assist policy offices and senior leaders with the development of outreach and engagement plans, and will help coordinate DoD-wide engagement efforts.”

However, some remain skeptical of the real impact this change will be able to inflict. Former Army commander Douglas Macgregor believes this is no more than American Hubris and will have very little effect.

Matt Armstrong disagrees with that stance, noting on his blog Mountain Runner, that McGregor is not focusing on the essential aspect of the intended results on the battleground. “This team is clearly intended to fill the gap, both statutory and operational, left by the abolishment of Support to Public Diplomacy,” he adds.

The public policy team's primary charge “will be heavy on coordination,” Withington said for Defense News, calling its focus an “agglomeration of outreach and engagement efforts abroad and in Washington.”

Undertaking this restructuring means that most functions, which were once carried out by the now-former office of support to public diplomacy, will be transferred to those regional directorates, each of which are headed by an assistant secretary of defense.

“DoD has a statutory obligation to support public diplomacy,” Withington said, “and policy's regional offices now have primary responsibility for defense support to public diplomacy, in coordination with appropriate functional policy offices.”

Israel Rewrites History

The Israeli government will remove references to what Palestinians call the “catastrophe” of Israel's creation from textbooks for Arab schoolchildren, the education minister announced on July 22, according to Reuters.

“This crude and diversionary line of thinking is directly related to Netanyahu's insistence that he will not give in to international demands to freeze Israeli settlement activity”

Ian Black, The Guardian.

The reference to “Al-Nakba,” echoes for the Palestinians as the defeat and exile in the war over Israel's 1948 creation, which was controversially inserted into the textbooks in 2007 by a dovish education minister. The term remains highly contentious six decades later.

When former education minister Yuli Tamir introduced the term, some hard-line Israelis accused her of making Israel look apologetic for its own existence. Tamir “is expressing a sort of political masochist spirit and ... a total lack of national pride,” Cabinet Minister Avigdor Lieberman said at the time. Lieberman is now Foreign Minister.

“No other country in the world, in its official curriculum, would treat the fact of its founding as a catastrophe,” Education Minister Gideon Saar told Israel’s parliament. Israeli Arab lawmakers consider it a denial of history, as well as a “major attack on the identity of the Palestinian Arab citizens of the state of Israel, on their memories and their adherence to their identity.”

Teachers will be free to discuss the personal and national tragedies that befell Palestinians during the war, said Saar, who represents the hard-line governing Likud Party. However, textbooks will be revised to remove the term, he added.

Saar said in an interview to the BBC, “There is no reason that the official curriculum of the state of Israel should present the establishment of the state as a ‘holocaust’ or ‘catastrophe.’”

Jafar Farrah, director of Israeli-Arab advocacy group Moussawa, told the BBC that removing the word “Nakba” from textbooks would not stop Arabs from using it, but would only further complicate relations. Far-right members of the Israeli government are pursuing legislation to make it illegal in Israel to commemorate the Nakba, as Palestinians and their supporters do every 15 May.

Reuters explains that following the 1948 war and the ensuing victory of the Jewish state against Arab nations, Israel seized territories beyond those allotted by the UN. More than 700,000 Palestinians are thought to have fled or been expelled from areas that came under Israeli control.

While Israeli textbooks have emphasized the heroism of their military forces and glossed over the flight of Palestinians, “attributing the mass exile to voluntary escape if mentioning it at all,” Palestinians keep demanding the right to repatriate the surviving refugees and more than 4 million descendants to their original homes in Israel.

Banning “Al-Nakba” from the Israeli textbook signals a major step backward in Israeli-Palestinian relations, as it erases the experience of the country’s Arab minority, remarks Ian Black for The Guardian.

If anything, the term is a vivid reminder of irreconcilable historical narratives about what happened in 1948, along with the circulation by Israel’s current foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman of a photograph of the Palestinian nationalist leader Haj Amin Al-Husseini meeting Hitler in Berlin during the Second World War.

“Both are the direct result of hardening political attitudes in Israel,” insists Black. He notes that the occurrence stems from a revisionist attitude among Israel’s “new” historians who claim that Palestinians are responsible for their own misfortune.

Black goes as far as to say that the “Nakba denial” is “as resonant and emotive to Palestinians as the Hebrew word ‘Shoah’ (for Holocaust) is to Israeli and Jews.” If the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis is to be resolved, understanding the Arab perspective is essential to understanding that Zionism symbolizes a movement of liberation for the Jews and that it is not another “manifestation of western colonialism.”

Likewise, this applies to Al-Husseini’s meeting Hitler, when he asked eastern European leaders to bar Jewish emigration to Palestine. Lieberman uses this old story in the service of his own cause – rebuffing pressure by Barack Obama to halt illegal Jewish settlement in occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, according to Black.

“This crude and diversionary line of thinking is directly related to Netanyahu’s insistence that he will not give in to international demands to freeze Israeli settlement activity,” he argues. The future will remain bleak as long as history is being used

and abused to justify current actions.

China Launches Arabic-Speaking Channel

Chinese state television launched a 24-hour Arabic-language channel targeting the Middle East and Africa in an effort to expand its influence abroad, reports The Chicago Tribune.

The channel will air in 22 Arabic-speaking countries and reach a population of close to 300 million people. At first, the channel will carry news, feature stories, entertainment and educational programs, but plans are in place to gradually expand the offerings.

The move is part of a program of international expansion by the state-controlled media to promote China’s image abroad. Dawn reports that the propaganda chief declared, “We must increase our broadcasting capacity to positively influence international public opinion and to give a good image of our nation.”

Zhang Changming, China Central Television (CCTV) vice president, claimed that the new channel “will serve as an important bridge to strengthen communication and understanding between China and Arab countries,” writes The Chicago Tribune.

The aim of the new channel is to address the “distorted” opinions about China in the Middle East and North Africa, reports Al-Jazeera. Through the Arabic channel, “the world can know China and China can know the rest of the world even better,” claims Changming.

Ying Chan, director of Hong Kong University’s Journalism and Media Studies Center, claims that broadcasting in Arabic will be a way to counter “unfair”

portrayals of China in the media.

“They want to announce their policies more to the world, and they also felt that the international media, led by the Western media, has not been fair to China,” stated Chan, according to Al-Jazeera.

The launch of the Arabic channel coincides with an era of rapid economic growth and rising global influence for China. More than half of the nation’s imported oil and natural gas comes from the Middle East, and analysts claim that the growing commercial ties between the two regions have redefined geopolitics, reports Arab News.

“[The new channel] will serve as an important bridge to strengthen communication and understanding between China and Arab countries.”

Zhang Changming, Vice President of China Central Television (CCTV).

Michael Hedges of followthemedias.com, explains the historical significance of broadcasting in the Middle East. “The rush to set up Arabic language satellite channels targeting the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region started after the first Persian War. During that conflict the Arabic speaking public tuned to CNN’s live coverage often rebroadcast locally or available on cable systems.” Hedges explains that this shift in attention by Western international media from Eastern

Europe to the MENA region has taken place relatively recently.

“It is imperative for us to be a multi-language, multi-faceted and multi-perspective broadcaster,” said Changming, in response to the number of other foreign broadcasts in the area, reports BBC.

However, Changming did not mention the restrictions on which stories the new channel will cover in light of routine censorship by the Chinese government. He also failed to explain how China would be able to counter the “distorted” views the new channel was created to address, if Chinese media remains censored even abroad.

Al-Jazeera Detainee Sues Bush

Al-Jazeera’s Sami Al-Haj is the only journalist to have been detained in Guantánamo. Al-Haj, of Sudanese origin, was illegally apprehended as a suspected terrorist and tortured by US authorities for seven years before his release in May 2008.

Pakistani police arrested Al-Haj in December 2001 while on his way to Afghanistan to work as a cameraman with an Al-Jazeera crew. Next, he was handed over to US forces who sent him to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, where, according to Amnesty International, he was severely mistreated, reports The Guardian. His interrogations in Afghanistan repeatedly focused on his employer and whether Al-Jazeera had links with Al Qaeda.

Al-Haj was flown to Cuba in June 2002 where, Amnesty International reports, he was repeatedly beaten, subjected to racist abuse and denied medicine. In 2003, when Al-Haj began a hunger protest, he was placed in isolation and taken to the harshest camp in Guantánamo.

Al-Haj tells The Guardian that Guantanamo is never far from his mind, since he now suffers from flashbacks and his gait is stiff as the result of a beating that shattered his knee.

“We don’t want [what happened to the international detainees] to be repeated again.”

Sami Al-Haj, detained Al-Jazeera journalist.

The Guardian claims that Al-Haj plans to take legal action, along with other detainees, against former US president George Bush and various administration officials for their illegal detention and torture. The case will be initiated by the Guantánamo Justice Centre, a new organization open to former prisoners, which will soon establish its international headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. The Centre is led by British ex-detainee Moazzam Begg and plans are in place to open a British branch soon.

According to Press TV, the Justice Centre will serve as a platform for the victims of Guantanamo. The organization intends to open an all-encompassing case against Bush rather, than address the issue in a case-by-case matter.

Al-Haj explains to The Guardian that the organization is currently in the process of “collecting information from all the people, such as medical evidence.” Al-Haj argues that Bush must be brought to trail because “we don’t want [what happened to the international detainees] to be repeated again.” The journalist is now back at work at Al-Jazeera’s headquarters in Doha, where he heads a new section

dedicated to issues of civil liberties and human rights, reports the Guardian. Al-Haj is frustrated with the media coverage of Guantanamo. He argues that the media no longer examines what continues to go on in Guantanamo, and that reporters fail to ask the real questions regarding released detainees.

Al-Haj tells The Guardian that the media is giving an easy ride to the current US president, claiming, "They believe Obama and his promises, but he has not kept them. Obama said he would immediately close Guantánamo Bay when he came to power. He has not. He said he would bring the people who committed torture to trial. He has not."

According to current developments regarding the closure of Guantanamo, there may be truth in Al-Haj's argument against President Obama. Al-Jazeera reports that a panel ordered by Barack Obama to develop new US policy on the detention of terrorism suspects has delayed its report to the President by six months.

Al-Jazeera explains that the progress is further hindered by divisions between Congress and the White House over the fate of detainees at Guantanamo. The President faces strong opposition from legislators, including those in his own Democratic party, regarding the transfer and trial of prisoners.

A separate government task force, which reviewed the rules for interrogating detainees, also failed to meet its Tuesday deadline and has been granted an extra two months to submit a final report. Al-Jazeera claims that the panel issued a five-page interim report stating, "where appropriate, prosecution of those responsible must occur as soon as possible," but that "justice cannot be done...unless those who are accused of crimes are proved guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law that affords them a full and fair opportunity to contest the charges against them."

In an article by Press TV, Al-Haj re-emphasized the urgent need for Obama to immediately close Guantanamo's prison, since torture continues to take place there. The Obama Administration claims that it remains on track to shut down the prison in Cuba by January.

Whether Obama will take the action necessary to correct the wrongs of the Bush Administration remains unseen, though Al-Haj and the Guantánamo Justice Centre will certainly continue to fight against the decisions of the Bush Administration.

Al-Jazeera's New Venture in the US

On July 1, 2009, Al-Jazeera English began broadcasting in Washington, DC on the MHz Network. MHz Network is an independent, non-commercial television broadcaster that provides international programming to the Washington-area. Al-Jazeera English only broadcasts in two other locations within the US: Toledo, Ohio and Burlington, Vermont, reports Forbes Magazine.

The deal with MHz Networks is a big step in Al-Jazeera's attempt to break into the US market. Tony Burman, managing director of Al-Jazeera English, tells Forbes Magazine that now there exists a new opportunity for Al-Jazeera in the US. "The transition from the Bush era to the Obama era has changed the game dramatically" because "as America reengages with the wider world, the appetite for more international news is there."

However, Al-Jazeera's greatest challenge in the US will be to overcome American's perception of bias in Al-Jazeera's reporting. Many Americans believe Al-Jazeera promotes a negative image of the US and Western Europe. According to the

Associated Press, former President George W. Bush frequently accused Al-Jazeera of "anti-Americanism."

Cliff Kincaid, director of conservative media watchdog Accuracy in Media and producer of the documentary Terror Television: The Rise of Al Jazeera and the Hate America Media, tells Forbes Magazine that Al-Jazeera "is a channel with an anti-American bias that since inception has been known as a mouthpiece of terrorists and of Al-Qaeda."

"As America reengages with the wider world, the appetite for more international news is there."

Tony Burman, managing director of Al-Jazeera English.

Al-Jazeera also suffers from a history of reporters with controversial connections. Forbes Magazine cites the example of Al-Jazeera correspondent Taysir Alouni, who interviewed Osama bin Laden just after the Sept. 11 attacks and is now under house arrest in Madrid after a Spanish court convicted him in 2005 of transporting cash for Al-Qaeda.

Moreover, the recent death of former ABC and Al-Jazeera producer Rebecca Lipkin, has brought negative publicity to Al-Jazeera. Lipkin was credited with bringing former ABC newsman Dave Marash to Al-Jazeera as a news anchor in 2006, and her obituary in the Washington Post claims that "Marash left the network [Al-Jazeera] last year, saying it had an anti-American bias."

Burman claims that the network

has no connection to Al-Qaeda and is on a par with CNN International and BBC World in the quality of its programming. Forbes Magazine asserts that although the network is owned by the government of Qatar, it is free of censorship and government meddling. Furthermore, oil-and-gas-rich Qatar is not an enemy of the US.

Interestingly, Burman believes that skepticism about the network's point of view can be an advantage, since Al-Jazeera aims "to appeal to viewers who get tired of Western or American perspectives and want a more global view of the world."

Cellcom is the Only One who "Wants to Have Fun"; Israel's PR Problem

Israeli cell phone giant, Cellcom, is under a wash of criticism in the wake of their controversial television ad released earlier this month, reports BBC News. The commercial, which features Israeli forces kicking a soccer ball back and forth with unseen Palestinians across the West Bank barrier wall, has sparked protest and intense disapproval from both sides of the issue.

Both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian commentators have lambasted the Cellcom ad, saying it "makes light of the separation barrier," according to Robert Mackey of The Lede, a New York Times news blog. Several Facebook groups have also emerged protesting the ad.

Mackey quotes Israeli blogger Noam Sheizaf, as saying that the ad "breaks some records in bad taste, even by Israeli standards." The article goes on to describe other bloggers who criticize the ad for keeping the Palestinians "invisible."

A group of Palestinians have even created a response video, reports BBC, in which the soccer ball kicked by Palestinians is answered by canisters of tear gas. The video, posted online, uses the same soundtrack as the Cellcom commercial.

"In Cellcom's eyes... even the most tragic and traumatic experiences of an entire people can be harnessed to the selling of mobile phone services."

Seth Freedman of The Guardian.

Lawmakers in Israel have now demanded the Cellcom ad be taken off the air, according to Reuters. In addition, Israeli member of parliament Ahmed Tibi, said "the advertisement presents the barrier as though it were just a garden fence in Tel Aviv...[but it] separates families and prevents children from reaching schools and clinics."

"In Cellcom's eyes... even the most tragic and traumatic experiences of an entire people can be harnessed to the selling of mobile phone services," writes Seth Freedman in an opinion piece for the Guardian. "If Cellcom's reaction is anything to go by...there is [a] long way to go before empathy is applied to those forever trapped behind the concrete slabs of the separation barrier."

At least one blogger interpreted the ad differently. Yariv Oppenheimer of the Jerusalem Post called it a "brave display of reconciliation," although he admits it is "hardly a 'perfect' commercial."

Oppenheimer praises the ad for attempting to depict something other than "models acting like models," but instead addressing a sensitive issue on the forefront of the Israeli conscience. He says the ad should be viewed not as a portrayal of the situation that currently exists, but as "a positive model for emulation."

The originality of the ad has also been called into question by two independent filmmakers, Itamar Rose and Yossi Atia, reports Offri Ilani at Haaretz. The filmmakers say Cellcom took the idea for the commercial from a short film they produced three years ago, which was screened at film festivals and is available on YouTube.

Rose and Atia's short has a different ending from the Cellcom commercial—the Palestinians do not return the ball tossed over the barrier by the Israelis. The filmmakers are now taking legal action against Cellcom, Ilani states.

Israel's PR Problem

Concerns have been growing for some time over perceptions of Israel's image, especially in Europe, reports Gerry Moriarty for Irish Times. He claims that Israelis are "very conscious" of their country's antagonistic reputation in much of Europe, and quotes a foreign affairs ministry official as saying, "We have completely lost the battle in the media...We need to get to the hearts and ears of people in Europe."

The Israeli foreign ministry has also established a "special undercover team" of mainly young people to spread "positive news about Israel" across the internet, reports The National. The team forms partly in response to the dissemination of anti-Israeli information following their attacks on Gaza last winter.

Several bloggers have brought attention to the growing trend

among writers outside the country to be critical of Israel.

One blogger, Jane Stillwater, was banned from a popular political blog site, DailyKos, on charges of anti-Semitism, says Philip Weis of Mondoweiss. Stillwater wrote a satirical piece on DailyKos suggesting that American Jews whose homes had been foreclosed on could find an easy housing solution through illegal settlements in Israel.

Helena Cobban of Just World News writes about an essay by poet Alice Walker, in which Walker describes the “courage” of the number of Jews who chose to “speak out against Israeli brutality.”

Cobban also praises a different blogger at DailyKos, who “is one of the new generation of Jewish-American bloggers” willing to criticize Israel and formulate “fair and sustainable ways to end Israel’s long-running oppression of the Palestinian people.”

Political scientist Marc Lynch, on his blog at Foreign Policy, also brought attention to Israeli public relations. Lynch advises readers to use caution when reading the series of “similar pieces” that have recently emerged which seem “geared towards creating the impression that Obama’s strong position on Israeli settlements [has] backfired,” and spin a “narrative that Obama is unfairly hostile to Israel.”

Lynch claims that these views, most notably those highlighted in an editorial for the Washington Post by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, are “advice from those who aren’t worried [Obama will] fail, they want him to fail.”

Dirty Talk Leads to Saudi Man in Handcuffs, and Not in the Good Way

Following an appearance on a Lebanese talk show, Mazen Abdul Jawad, a 32-year old Saudi man, was arrested for speaking publicly about his sexual exploits, reports The Media Line.

While being interviewed for “Red Line,” a show featured on the Lebanon-based channel LBC, Jawad admitted to first having sex when he was 14 years old with his neighbor, describing the foreplay in great detail, according to Arabian Business.

“Perhaps these youths are deluded into thinking that by taking part in such television programs they will be considered modern and open-minded.”

Mubamad Diyab, Asharq-Alawsat.

Jawad continued his interview by explaining that he uses the Bluetooth function on his cell phone to pick up women, as they are forbidden to interact with men in public in Saudi Arabia. The American Foreign Press (AFP) reports that he also revealed a recipe for an aphrodisiac on the air.

The appearance caused over 100 complaints to local justice officials in Saudi Arabia, leading to Jawad’s arrest. He faces charges under the strict Islamic Sharia law of speaking openly about vice and admitting to pre-marital sex, according to the AFP.

Ahmad Qasim Al-Ghamdi, director of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice for

Mecca, said “The program presents anomalies and deviancy in society that are unacceptable and immoral and should be punished according to Sharia,” reports Arab News.

Al-Ghamdi, according to Arabian Business, claims that all those involved with the broadcast are culpable. If convicted, Jawad could be jailed and flogged under Sharia law.

The Media Line reports that “Red Line” addresses a variety of social and political issues, but faced fierce backlash across the Arab world for a program dedicated to the subject of homosexuality in February.

Jawad plans to file a lawsuit against the producers of the show, claiming that his remarks were “taken out of context.” However, Malik Maktabi, the presenter of “Red Line,” told Arab News that the program was not meant to tarnish the respectability or reputation of Saudi Arabia.

“I host people from around the Arab world, not only Saudi Arabia. From all the twelve guests I have hosted, only a couple of programs have featured Saudis,” he claimed. “I present the cases as they are, and I have highlighted humanitarian achievements from Saudi Arabia, such as organ donation.”

Saudi Arabia has been accused of widespread media censorship, though the Kingdom referred to media as being “openly defended” for the sake of the Islamic moral codes. Reporters Without Borders have expressed continued concern in light of the Saudi government’s repeated crack-downs on issues pertaining to human rights and civil liberties, reports The Media Line. The case of Jawad’s sexual revelations proves to be no different than other censorship cases, as Saudi Arabian officials have chosen to justify his arrest through Islamic law.

Muhamad Diyab of Asharq-Alawsat, argues that such shows encourage young men and women

to discuss highly-sensitive issues like homosexuality and infidelity, while causing serious harm as they fail to take into consideration the Arab social milieu. The program's producers shoulder the most social responsibility for all the confessions made on the program and the subsequent impact they might have.

"It is not enough to say that the program is discussing and dealing with real issues in Arab societies," he says. According to Diyab, these shows are a product of Western media attitudes that clash with the values of Arab societies, and therefore generate confusion among the youth.

Diyab wonders, "Perhaps these youths are deluded into thinking that by taking part in such television programs they will be considered modern and open-minded, so they make comments that do not necessarily reflect their reality and lifestyle."

Citing the possibility of a strong desire to appear on television explains the variety of incentives for different guests to participate in such shows, regardless of the consequences. This occurs without taking into consideration the serious impact these confessions might have on their lives, such as social isolation, disapproval and rejection.

Saudi Clerics Defeat Movie Reformers

Saudi Arabia's top religious clerics pressured government officials to cancel this week's Jeddah Film Festival, endorsed by Jeddah city officials as part of their summer tourist offering, reports Jackson Allers for Menassat. Advocates for freer media and reformers alike, have decried the move as another example of cultural repression exercised by the national religious authorities.

"Late last night, the governorate

of Jeddah notified us of the festival's cancellation, after it received instructions from official parties. We were not told why," said Mamdouh Salem, one of the Jeddah Film Festival organizers.

The summer festival entitled "Jeddah is different," was set to commence, with the preparations having gone smoothly within the Jeddah municipality. Unfortunately, in the three days following the clerics' announcement, the film festival was cancelled without any official statement explaining the change in plans.

Jeddah municipality spokesman, Ahmad Al-Ghamdi, told Arab News that the festival "lacked preparations," although he did not name those elements that were allegedly "lacking."

The cancellation of the Jeddah Film Festival comes after King Abdullah removed a number of conservative clerics from the Saudi government earlier this year; a move many hoped would lead to a freer media environment.

Historically, Saudi religious authorities have strongly frowned upon music and cinema, accusing the latter of "display[ing] forbidden distractions that create disorder."

Thus, films become a hard sell in a country where cinemas have been banned for almost 30 years, reports CBC. That ban was finally broken in December with the screening of the Saudi comedy *Menahi* in two cities in the Middle Eastern kingdom. Consequently, the film brought sharp criticisms from a number of hard-line Muslim clerics, as well as from Ibrahim Al-Ghaith, the former head of the country's religious police, who proclaimed that cinema in general, is evil.

There were 45 Saudi films among the 71 being considered for the \$53,000 prize money, including two feature-length films. The Jeddah Film Festival joins a growing number of cultural

events prohibited by Saudi religious clerics, including an opera concert with French soprano, Isabelle Poulenard, who had her embassy-sponsored performance forbidden by religious clerics two days before her concert – despite gaining official approval.

King Abdullah tried to institute cautious reforms in his country, but foreign diplomats say he faces strong resistance from conservatives opposed to even minor changes, comments Arabian Business.

Predictably, the canceling of the film festival has drawn criticism from the Arab blogosphere. Meanwhile, the festival's main sponsor, Rotana, the largest Arab media network in the world and owned by Prince Alwaleed, has not given a public statement on the festival's cancellation.

The Prince seems undeterred, as Rotana boldly set itself as the main sponsor of the Jeddah Film Festival, donating the proceeds earned from his film.

The cancellation of the festival is also perceived as a major blow to reformists across the country, according to *The Independent*. In a country where cinemas were banned for almost three decades, the Jeddah Film Festival has since 2006 presented aspiring Saudi filmmakers and actors with a rare opportunity to mingle with more experienced peers from other countries.

Al-Jazeera Re-opened in West Bank

The Palestinian Authority allowed Al-Jazeera to resume operations in the West Bank after banning the Arab satellite station for four days, reports the Associated Press. The injunction and pending lawsuit against Al-Jazeera came in the wake of its decision to

broadcast former Palestine Liberation Organization Chief Farouk Al-Kouddoumi's claims that Mahmoud Abbas and Mohammad Dahlan conspired with Israel to assassinate late President Yasser Arafat, according to Saseen Kawzally for Menassat.

Kawzally writes that Al-Kaddoumi "organized an exclusive press conference in the Jordanian capital on July 12, 2009, in which he declared that he had the transcripts of conversations held between former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, his Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, current de facto Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the former Head of the Preventive Security Services in Gaza, Mohammad Dahlan, in the presence of an American security team led by William Burns."

In the minutes published by Al-Jazeera.net, Sharon, Abbas and Dahlan discussed the possibility of assassinating Arafat and the heads of the Palestinian resistance, and stated that Sharon "insisted on killing Arafat by poisoning to pave the way for the killing of the rest of the Palestinian leaders, with Israeli help." Since Arafat's death in Paris in 2004 remains shrouded in mystery, Al-Kaddoumi's accusations stirred considerable controversy within many levels of the Palestinian leadership, though most notably among Fatah supporters, writes Human Rights Watch.

Consequently, Fatah's Deputy Minister of Information, Salaam Fayyad, ordered the bureau's suspension on July 15 and instructed Attorney General Ahmed Al-Mughni to prosecute Al-Jazeera for "incitement against the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority," reports the Ramallah-based Ma'an News Agency.

"Despite our repeated calls to remain neutral when it covers the Palestinian issue and to be balanced when it comes to the internal Palestinian situation, the channel continues to incite against the PLO and the PA," a PLO statement

said. Moreover, Fayyad denounced Al-Kaddoumi's documented minutes from the Sharon, Abbas and Dahlan meeting as a forgery, notes the BBC.

Skepticism with regards to Al-Jazeera is nothing new, Al-Bawaba notes, as the channel has "often been accused of bias against the governments of the US and Israel and is often criticized by Arab governments for being too critical." Additionally, the Christian Science Monitor reports that "Officials in Ramallah have complained in the past few years – particularly since Hamas ousted Fatah from Gaza amid intense fighting in 2007 – that the station has grown more sympathetic toward Hamas than Fatah."

"Officials in Ramallah have complained in the past few years... that [Al-Jazeera] has grown more sympathetic toward Hamas than Fatah."

Christian Science Monitor.

Nevertheless, the Director of Al-Jazeera in Beirut, Ghassan bin Jeddo, told Menassat's Kawzally that Fatah's decision to shut-down the television station was "strange and shocking because Al-Jazeera was not the only media outlet to air Al-Kaddoumi's accusations . . . [made] at a public press conference."

According to Kawzally, even Fatah media reported on Al-Kaddoumi's controversial allegations, leaving bin Jeddo to surmise that covering the "press conference couldn't be the sole reason behind the station's closure. He added that he didn't know

the real reason, and described the procedure as a dangerous abuse of freedom of opinion and expression."

Similarly, in Al-Jazeera's officially-released statement, the channel said it "believes that it has maintained strict professional journalistic standards and acted in accordance with its Code of Ethics in its coverage, and that the Palestinian Authority's reaction reflects a repression of the freedom of media and a refusal to tolerate the opinions of others," writes Kawzally.

The prominent Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) agreed with Al-Jazeera's statement condemning the decision to suspend the TV station's operations indefinitely. According to the Palestinian News Network, PCHR asserted that Fayyad's decision constituted "a flagrant violation of the right to freedom of expression. . . as ensured by the Palestinian Basic Law and international humanitarian [law]."

New York-based Human Rights Watch also called on Palestinian officials to immediately allow the network to reopen its offices in Ramallah, writes Al-Jazeera.net. Sarah Leah Whitson, the Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch, argued that "The suspension of Al-Jazeera [sic] sends a clear message that the Palestinian Authority has red lines when it comes to free speech."

"Are they going to silence the media every time someone reports something they don't like?," she asked with regard to Fayyad's punitive actions against Al-Jazeera.

The Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) likewise criticized the suspension, calling it a "serious violation of press freedom" and pointing out that "It shows intolerance on the part of the Palestinian Authority and suggests that it is trying to control media by suppressing reporting which it does not like," Aidan White, the General Secretary of IFJ, said in a statement.

Fortunately, according to Reuters, the Palestinian Authority said that it will allow Al-Jazeera television to resume operations in its territory, though Prime Minister Fayyad added that he will still “pursue legal action against the broadcaster for its continuous incitement against the PLO and the Palestinian National Authority.”

Walid Al-Omary, Al-Jazeera’s Bureau Chief in Israel and the Palestinian territories, welcomed the retraction: “This is the right decision. Media outlets should not be banned from doing their work. If they have something against us, they should go to the courts.”

There is much speculation about the Palestinian Authority’s reasons behind revoking their embargo on Al-Jazeera in the West Bank. The Associated Press posits that by shutting down the region’s Palestinian bureau, “Abbas risked picking a fight with one of the most potent shapers of Arab public opinion.”

In her open letter of criticism to the PA, Khalid Amayreh, writer for thepeoplesvoice.org, accuses the ruling body of “behaving like a police state, and in your case, it is a police state without a state. This is certainly a bad beginning for you and for the ‘independent and sovereign’ state you are dreaming of.”

While the PA has yet to come forward with its motivations for allowing Al-Jazeera to function again in the region, Marc Lynch adeptly encapsulates the implications of the tumultuous relationship, stating: “The reflexive hostility to a free media shows yet again why the Palestinian Authority in its current configuration is a poor foundation for building a viable Palestinian state, and shows the need for major political and institutional reforms.”

Obama and the Muslim World: A Long Way to Go

The Pew Research Center’s annual global attitudes survey demonstrated that the 27,000 people polled in 25 countries have a more positive attitude towards the US. In many countries, positive opinions of the US are now almost as strong as they were before George W. Bush took office, proving that Barack Obama has restored America’s global standing.

According to the Pew Research Center, the resurgence in the US image reflects international confidence in Obama’s foreign policy. The approval rating for Obama’s current international policies was high in most countries.

The majority of countries support the closure of Guantanamo and the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, yet many oppose the increase of troops in Afghanistan. Moreover, the opinion of US unilateralism has not changed; most feel as though the US does not consider other countries when making foreign policy decisions.

Analysis of the survey concludes that views of the US are influenced more by personal confidence in Obama than by opinions of his specific policies. Even in some countries where the US remains unpopular, significant percentages of the population believe that Obama “will do the right thing in international affairs.”

For example, in Egypt and Jordan, where US favorability is rated at 25 and 27 percent respectively, confidence in Obama stands at 42 and 31 percent. Moreover, many of the people polled claimed that it was Obama’s election which led them to have a more favorable view of the US.

Improvements in the US image are most pronounced in Western Europe, though, the poll suggests that

views of America improved even in predominantly Muslim countries that held overwhelmingly negative views of the US during the Bush administration. This shows that America’s standing has advanced the world over. The most obvious improvement in a Muslim country occurred in Indonesia where the population embraces Obama’s family ties to the country.

Yet, for the most part, opinions of the US among Muslims in the Middle East remain largely unfavorable. Despite a slight increase in US opinion in Egypt and Jordan, animosity toward the US remains strong in the Palestinian territories, with 15 percent in 2009, and in Turkey, with 14 percent - the lowest rating in 2009.

“Obama’s high-profile address to the Muslim world in Cairo this summer... has yet to mend the fences Obama sought out.”

Chris Good of The Atlantic.

The polling in the Muslim world took place before and after Obama’s speech in Cairo, allowing experts at Pew to measure the effect of Obama’s remarks. The experts’ analysis of the poll determined that the speech had little measurable impact on views of the US or Obama himself. Chris Good, from The Atlantic, agrees, “Obama’s high-profile address to the Muslim world in Cairo this summer... has yet to mend the fences Obama sought out.”

Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright tells the Financial Times that she is “a little surprised by the continuing Muslim numbers.” Albright described the Muslim and Western worlds as being in a “very deep rift,”

which would “take some time to fix.”

The Moor Next Door agrees that Obama will need to take concrete action following the speech in order to change Muslim opinion. The source claims that Obama’s “overtures to the Arabs were largely symbolic in nature, designed to make their publics more optimistic” and that Obama is “more interested in the spin around big talk than what the words actually mean or what might come of them in real terms.” The article cites the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an example, stating that, “the Obama administration has not been tough on either the Israelis or the Arabs; it has made promises and little progress.”

The image of the US improved in every country except Israel, where the current US rating is lower than in past surveys. Israeli opinion slipped notably after Obama’s speech in Cairo, while in contrast, Palestinian opinion improved after the speech, but only by 5 percent.

The number of Palestinians who believe that Obama will consider their country’s interests when making international policy increased from 27 to 39 percent, following the Cairo speech. Yet, more than six in ten Jordanians, Egyptians and Lebanese do not think that the US president will fairly handle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Nevertheless, for the first time in the history of Pew’s surveys, there is more confidence overall in the US president than in bin Laden. Yet, in the Palestinian territories and Pakistan, bin Laden’s ratings continue to exceed Obama’s by considerable margins.

Everyone Loves Twitter

Twitter has almost tripled its use in the Middle East and North Africa over the past several months, reports AME Info. The article cites research conducted by Spot On

Public Relations, communications consultants based in the Middle East.

This year “has seen great numbers of [non-internet professionals] join Twitter,” which has led to greater “media influence and search engine impact,” AME Info says. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have the greatest number of Twitter users— countries which also have the most Facebook users, according to the report.

“Though the government attempted to limit access to the Web, it was unable to prevent global activism in response to the Iranian election crisis.”

James Jay Carafano of the American Heritage Foundation.

Carrington Malin, managing director of Spot On Public Relations, told AME Info that their study proves “that Twitter is starting to make its presence felt across the [Middle East] region.”

The use of Twitter across the Middle East garnered extensive international attention during the recent presidential election in Iran. James Jay Carafano of the American Heritage Foundation writes that social networking played several key roles during the Iranian election, including “mobilizing the Iranian Diaspora [and] organizing the activists.”

“Though the government attempted to limit access to the Web, it was unable to prevent global

activism in response to the Iranian election crisis,” he continues.

Carafano also points out that Iran has long sought to control citizens’ access to the internet, by banning a number of websites, censoring search terms, and requiring both Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet Connection Providers (ICPs) to be licensed and monitored by the government. During the election, the Iranian government also removed most traditional journalists.

“Iranians turned to activists outside the country to help facilitate the transfer of information,” Carafano writes. Outside Iran, where fast and open internet access is possible, activists were able to set up proxy servers, provide English translations, and collect and post the volumes of “street journalism” coming out of the country.

Reports included “details about the location of future protests, posting warnings on government crackdowns, and sharing updates on individuals injured, killed, arrested, or missing,” says Carafano.

Iran has now recently enacted a law which is intended to increase internet security and reduce “cybercrimes,” reports PressTV. The law “stipulates punishments for specified illegal activities in cyberspace.”

The law is controversial because it requires ISPs “to store all the data sent or received by each of their clients,” the article states, and although the legislation also bars surveillance of the data except by court order, there is an open possibility of misuse.

Bloggers under Attack

In Egypt, three young bloggers were arrested last week during the government’s increasingly intense campaign to stifle dissent and freedom

of expression online, reports Noha Atef for Global Voices Advocacy.

Blogger Abdel Rahman Ayyash was arrested at the Cairo airport on July 21 after attending a youth conference in Turkey.

Later that day, Magdi Saad, who blogs at Yalla, Mesh Mohem (“Come On, Who Cares”), was also arrested at the Cairo airport. Saad is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition group in Egypt, according to The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

“It’s...the only source that truly brings us together regardless of our opinions or backgrounds, something traditional media has failed to ever achieve.”

Esra’a Al-Abafei, founder of MidEastYouth.com.

The third blogger, Ahmed Abu Khalil, was arrested at dawn on the morning of July 22 when security forces raided his home. Abu Khalil, a self-proclaimed “Islamist,” blogs at Bayarek (meaning “lanterns”) and writes primarily about his personal life. The three consecutive arrests are the latest in a series of media-related seizures in Egypt, a nation which CPJ ranks as number ten on their list of the “10 Worst Places to Be a Blogger.”

Amnesty International issued a public statement calling Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to order the release of Mosaad Abu Fagr and Karim Amer, two

activists who have been imprisoned for over 18 months and who are now considered by the organization as “prisoners of conscience.”

Abu Fagr has been held without charge or trial since December 2007, when he was arrested in connection to demonstrations in North Sinai over Bedouin rights. Fagr is the founder of the Sinai-based movement, Wedna Na’Ish (“We Want to Live”), which fights for land and citizen rights for the Bedouin people.

Amer, on the other hand, was sentenced to four years in prison in 2007 for criticizing President Mubarak and the Islamic faith. The three recent arrests and the general trend now in place show that security forces within Egypt are unlikely to stop similar future arrests, even in light of protests from human rights groups worldwide.

“We call on the authorities to explain why Abdel Rahman Ayyash, Magdi Saad, and Ahmed Abu Khalil are being detained. These arrests are but the latest in an ongoing attempt to silence online journalism in Egypt,” wrote CPJ Middle East and North Africa Program Coordinator Mohamed Abdel Dayem.

Joseph Mayton for Menassat reports that Ayyash’s arrest “comes as he continues his push to create a new space for discussion over the Islamist movement in Egypt.”

With blogging gaining in popularity across the Middle East, the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University has published an extensive study called “Mapping the Arab Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent,” which analyzes the numerous trends which continue to shape a burgeoning and controversial industry across the region.

The study examines the development of the Arabic blogosphere and its connections to politics, culture, religion, and other major issues.

Specifically, it finds that Egypt

represents by far the largest “cluster” of bloggers, which can be divided into several “sub-clusters,” including secular reformists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose online presence, though illegal, has been more or less tolerated up until recently.

In addition, in a recent interview with Iran Press Watch, Esra’a Al-Shafei, the founder of MideastYouth.com, expressed her views on the positive role of the internet as a venue for unity and free speech.

“It’s...the only source that truly brings us together regardless of our opinions or backgrounds, something traditional media has failed to ever achieve,” she said. Al-Shafei stressed the resilience and dedication of youth who have continued to express themselves in new formats, despite advanced methods to deter or silence them.

“The worsening amount of censorship in the region is certainly causing people to long for freedom of speech, hence why so many people are risking their lives for it. Our generation is very different, and we do not accept censorship,” she concludes.

Human Rights and Development in the Arab World

In a 69-page report, Amnesty International denounces Saudi Arabia’s human rights violations, which were committed under the pretense of fighting terrorism, reports BBC. The human rights group alleges that Saudi authorities have detained 3,100 people, while failing to disclose the names of those tried or details pertaining to the charges.

Those being held include former Guantanamo Bay detainees, reports The Guardian. The Saudi interior minister declared in a statement two years ago that 9,000 security suspects

were detained since 2001. According to the Amnesty report, 3,106 remain in detention. Unofficial sources put the number much higher, citing waves of arrests that have occurred over the last two years, notes BBC.

Reuters reports that although Al-Qaeda began a campaign to destabilize the Saudi government in 2003, security forces in cooperation with foreign experts ended the violence. BBC security correspondent, Frank Gardener, remarks that Amnesty concedes that most of the thousands detained without trial have links to groups responsible for attacks, though their cases remain shrouded in secrecy, wherein basic human rights become neglected.

The Amnesty report claims that Saudi authorities beat prisoners and use sleep deprivation and electroshock to obtain confessions, writes the LA Times. Malcolm Smart, the director of Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa Program, said on Amnesty's website that, "Most [detainees] are held incommunicado for years without trial, and are denied access to lawyers and the courts to challenge the legality of their detention."

Kate Allen, the director of Amnesty's UK office, calls for a change in the policy of the Saudi authorities and accuses the international community of being "far too muted" in their response to Saudi violations of human rights, reports BBC. Malcolm Smart adds, "The Saudi Arabian government has used its powerful international clout to get away with [human rights violations]."

A Saudi Interior Ministry official, Abdulrahman Al-Hadlaq, responded to the Amnesty report stating, "These are claims that have to be proven," reports the LA Times. Al-Hadlaq went on to say that Saudi human rights policies are very clear and that "the orders given are for prisoners to be treated with respect and according to international human-rights principles."

Amnesty warns that the Saudi

government has attempted to deflect attention from human rights abuses with a state-controlled media focus on the high-profile case against a group of 991 detainees, and on the new "re-education" program, reports The Guardian. The LA Times notes that the Saudi Ministry of Justice has released statistics citing "330 suspects [of the 991] tried for terror-related offenses, receiving penalties ranging from fines to death."

Amnesty claims that in addition to the mass arrests, many detainees have been killed in "uncertain circumstances," while hundreds more face secret summary trials and possible execution. The organization points out that some of the prisoners were targeted for their peaceful criticism of government policy.

"From the Saudi point of view they have not violated anything...they are going to mitigate any threat to the state, no matter what cost."

Dr. Theodore Karasik, the Institute for Near East & Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA).

ABC notes that some analysts claim the human rights allegations and harsh tactics are a tradeoff for what is considered a successful counterterrorism effort. After all, Saudi authorities have been widely credited with defeating al-Qaeda in their country.

"From the Saudi point of view they have not violated anything...they are going to mitigate any threat to the

state, no matter what cost," said Dr. Theodore Karasik, a security expert at the Institute for Near East & Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA), a Dubai-based think tank.

Dr. Mustafa Alani, Director of Security and Terrorism Studies at the Gulf Research Center, argues that the Saudi re-education or rehabilitation program, which combines ideological re-orientation with economic incentives, enjoys early public praise. With an estimated 3,000 Saudis who have been through the program, one to ten percent are believed to have returned to terrorism. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's perceived success in securing its borders from terrorism is blamed for creating the conditions favorable to the regrouping of jihadis in Yemen, a weak state with rampant poverty.

The Amnesty report accompanies a UN assessment of security in the Arab World, which faults governments for curtailing the growth and development of their citizens, reports the Washington Times. The assessment states that infringement on human rights is a larger obstacle to development than the "oil curse" or foreign occupation.

The UN Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Report recommends that Arab governments outlaw discrimination against women and minorities, protect the environment and create meaningful work. Although Adel Abdellatif, UNDP program director for the Arab region, claims that most Arab governments have adopted laws protecting specific human rights, the laws are often "upended" or "outsized" by security organizations or government decrees.

The UNDP report finds that oil wealth, sometimes blamed for the excesses that limit human development, is not in itself a curse, as long as the state uses its proceeds to invest in infrastructure to improve the lives of its citizens.

In line with the UNDP assessment, a campaign started by Wajeha Al-Huweidar, a female journalist and

human rights activist, seeks to end the Saudi Mahram Law, reports MEMRI. The law forbids women to leave their home without a male guardian.

In an article on the liberal website Minbar Al-Hiwar Wal'Ibra (<http://www.member-alhewari.info>), Al-Huweidar describes Saudi Arabia as the “largest women’s prison.” She states that Saudi women have no prospects of release, unlike real prisoners, since throughout their life they are under the control of a male guardian. Mahram, meaning “forbidden,” refers to a male guardian whom a woman cannot legally marry, but who can serve as her guardian.

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