

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Pentagon Puts a Halt to Facebook and Twitter

Following an order on August 3, the US Marine Corps banned the use of social media sites on its computer network. Marines are now prohibited from accessing sites such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace via the Marine Corps Enterprise Network for one year, reports The Province.

Marine spokespersons said the ban is necessary because “these Internet sites in general are a proven haven for malicious actors and content and are a particularly high risk [for] information exposure, [due to] user-generated content and targeting by adversaries,” reports Emily Miller for Politics Daily. Initially, the ban is in effect for one year.

“The mechanisms for social networking were never designed for security and filtering,” an unnamed STRATCOM source told Wired. “They make it way too easy for people with bad intentions to push malicious code to unsuspecting users.”

Last month, for instance, well-known venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki’s Twitter account was hijacked, and used to spread a sex video to his 139,000 online viewers, notes Noah Strachman for Wired. Those following the link were asked to install a software update. The application was, in fact, a ‘Trojan’ virus, which allowed hackers to take over users’ machines.

Graham Cluely, a senior consultant with the network security firm,

Sophos, points out that “People are much more trusting of a message from a friend or colleague on a social network than they are of an e-mail, because they’re used to e-mails being forged.” Thus, social networking sites become an attractive vehicle for those with malicious intentions to make “friends” and inflict virtual harm.

He explains that while email accounts scan viruses and spam, social networks do not. People started working with these social networks “before we got a handle on how to use them in the context of the Department of Defense,” a STRATCOM source says. “Now, they’re just too big of a headache.”

Despite these concerns, Miller states that the Pentagon abundantly uses social media as a powerful and effective tool “to communicate directly with the public on military issues.”

Case in point; the US Army recently decided to increase its outreach through social media by regularly updating public audiences through Facebook and Twitter. Several military personnel propose that while unfortunate, these social media sites prove necessary since the mainstream media has a tendency to overlook positive American military activities, as a Major explains on his blog, A Major’s Perspective. Miller comments for Politics Daily: “I think the Marine Corps is shortsighted to shut down all social networking sites out of fear of network security breaches.”

She concludes that the American military is the most powerful and sophisticated in the world, and hence dispatches enough clever IT guys to allow the use of Facebook without

creating a national security threat.

However, Wired’s Danger Room notes that Price Floyd, the military’s new social networking ‘czar,’ said

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analysis is still being conducted regarding the restriction and no final decision has been made.

“I think the Marine Corps is shortsighted to shut down all social networking sites out of fear of network security breaches.”

Emily Miller, Politics Daily.

He says Secretary of Defense Robert Gates hired him in June for the sole purpose of “using the technology — both the websites and software out there now — that enable [Gates] to engage and hear from people in a way and manner that wasn’t possible before.” A blanket social media prohibition would obviously complicate Floyd’s mission.

Floyd added that the central objective is to strike a balance with social network use, without minimizing security concerns, as such sites play an increasingly important role in public diplomacy.

If He Twitters, They Will Come

In an attempt to “burst the presidential bubble” and relate to citizens of both the US and the world, the Obama administration has turned to social media to spread its message farther and wider, according to Margaret Talev and Warren P. Strobel of McClatchy Newspapers, in the Kansas City Star.

The eJournal USA Facebook page, run by the State Department, boasts

42,000 fans worldwide, allowing non-US citizens unable to vote to serve as a “world-spanning sounding board when the president wants to take the global pulse, exert leverage overseas or simply burnish America’s image,” claim Talev and Strobel.

Though Obama’s online approach to public diplomacy seems groundbreaking, Tavel and Strobel point out that the administration is actually playing catch-up with countries such as Israel, who launched the first government blog in 2006 and held the first Twitter news conference in December.

Within the administration, Judith McHale has emerged as a strong supporter of social media’s role in public diplomacy for reaching “deep into societies.” “We had to find new ways of communicating with foreign publics, given the role that they have now in the political and social lives of their countries,” she stated in a recent interview.

Another proponent of what is being called ‘Public Diplomacy 2.0’ is the spokesman for Israel’s New York consulate, David Saranga, who organized a “citizens’ press conference” in order to field questions about Israel’s actions on Twitter after the country’s military strikes on the Gaza Strip last December.

“New media and social media help me to go directly to the public opinion,” Saranga said.

However, some practitioners and politicians are cynical about the negative impact social media may have on U.S. public diplomacy efforts. Blogger Madhurjya writes that it may be a strategic tool for some nations but not for others, claiming that some smaller countries with the capability and the know-how will find it easier to influence Europeans and Americans with mass outreach.

Madhurjya argues that the strategic advantage lies with these smaller

countries rather than with the developed West when it comes to Public Diplomacy 2.0. He cites the example of Iran during its recent elections, when he claims that it was easier for protesters to reach and influence an American audience via social media than it was for the US to reach Iranians.

Whether or not social media will have an influential impact on US public diplomacy, it is clear that the use of Twitter, YouTube and other online tools can be used to benefit the Obama administration, writes Holly Bailey of Newsweek.

Bailey points out that by using social networking and posting videos on the internet, the Obama administration bypasses the traditional media and controls the images and the stories in order to propagate

“When things get rocky -- and they always do, at some point -- White House officials often look for other methods of lobbying the public.”

Holly Baily, Newsweek.

the messages they want to send.

She writes, “When Obama needs to use the bully pulpit-- as he did on health care-- he still turns to interviews with the TV networks and major print correspondents to get the word out, just as his predecessors did. But when things get rocky-- and they always do, at some point-- White House officials often look for other methods of lobbying the public.”

While social media can help the Obama administration improve their image, its effect on the image of the US throughout the rest of the world remains undetermined.

Focusing on the Arab World

The White House plans to begin a public relations campaign in Arab countries and Israel soon, reports Mother Jones. The campaign, which will include interviews with President Obama on Arab and Israeli television, seeks “to better explain Mr. Obama’s plans for a comprehensive peace agreement involving Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab world,” amounting to “a reframing of a policy that people inside and outside the administration say has become overly defined by the American pressure on Israel to halt settlement construction on the West Bank.”

Marc Lynch at ForeignPolicy.com suggests that Obama’s strategic communications campaign is designed to offer reassurance while “explaining the American view of the urgency of the moment for a push towards peace.” Lynch added that a host of campaign outreach tools could be deployed in addition to television interviews, including new media: blogs, Twitter, and other online venues.

With the rise of new media, Shawn Powers suggests on the USC Center on Public Diplomacy Blog that we have entered the ‘era’ of the hyperlink where the ‘science of knowledge’ is in the midst of a revolution. Powers cites a blog post by David Weinberger where he says that while the popularity of new or alternative media has risen, “prestige media” has lost legitimacy. With this trend, Weinberger believes that the future of the news industry lies in transparency.

Weinberg argues, “What we used to believe because we thought the author was objective we now believe because we can see through the author’s

writings to the sources and values that brought her to that position.” Weinberger concludes, “In fact, transparency subsumes objectivity.”

“Anyone who claims objectivity should be willing to back that assertion up by letting us look at sources, disagreements, and the personal assumptions and values supposedly bracketed out of the report. Objectivity without transparency increasingly will look like arrogance.”

“What we used to believe because we thought the author was objective we now believe because we can see through the author’s writings to the sources and values that brought her to that position.”

David Weinberger

Powers suggests that reporting news without the infliction of bias “is no longer tenable in the eyes of a generation of media consumers with access to any number of competing news narratives, the subtle differences between which expose some level of bias throughout.”

Powers believes that the ascendancy of new media levels the playing field and provides governments a new “means of conveying information that does not require a leap of faith by the audience to be trusted.” This development has allowed public diplomacy practitioners to establish “ubiquitous” means

of engaging foreign audiences.

Khalid Hasan, on Brand-Marketing.net, argues that “nation branding” has now become an integral part of public diplomacy. Hasan suggests that nation branding, or the positioning of a particular country in the minds of consumers, potential tourists and investors, “accelerates the country’s economic growth; and the citizens feel dignified.”

Hasan cites recent “crispy, smart, and intelligent” slogans developed by nations to fit business needs. These slogans include “Dubai: The Jewel in the Desert,” and “Sri Lanka: The Pearl of the Indian Ocean”. Hasan presents case studies of nation branding in Kenya, India, Columbia and Bangladesh, which has faced positive and negative branding since its 1971 war of liberation.

Hasan concludes that nation branding is more than brand advertising or promotion. Rather, “nation branding focuses on the nation as a whole -- its heritage and culture, products and exports, investment, climate, tourism, and people. The campaign must address people both at home and abroad.”

When faced with the prospect of “nation branding” America, John Matel comes out in opposition on World-Wide-Matel. He argues that America should not “prim and trim” itself to “win ephemeral popularity.” Matel adds that the roles of marketers and government are very different. A marketer only has to appeal to whom they are selling a product, while government must appeal to everyone in the marketing universe. Matel suggests that the U.S. “product,” or policies, “is determined by forces way beyond our small ability to add or detract.”

Saudi Man May Have Dirty-Talked Himself to Death; Dirty Talk Offices Shut

Mazen Abdul-Jawad, a Saudi man arrested for sharing his sexual exploits on a Lebanese talk show, may face death or long-term imprisonment under the kingdom's Islamic law, says Reuters.

Telegraph reports that the 32-year-old Saudi national held back little during his July 15 appearance on the Lebanese Broadcasting Channel (LBC) show "Bold Red Line." From his Jeddah apartment, Jawad showed audiences a sex guide on his bookshelf and told of his first sexual encounter with a neighbor at the age of fourteen.

Perhaps most aggravating to the Saudi government was Jawad's divulging of the means through which he picked up women: Bluetooth headsets. In a country where public interaction between the sexes is frowned upon, Bluetooth can be used to facilitate communication in crowded areas.

The Saudi government, strongly influenced by the conservative clerical establishment, will not take these offences lightly.

"It all depends on the judge's point of view since there are no precise sentences for offences like this but the judge may show no flexibility towards him and could sentence him to death by stoning to set an example," Saudi lawyer Suleiman Al-Alwan said.

According to Donna Abu-Nasr of the Canadian Press, Jawad has hired a lawyer, Al-Jumeii, and is preparing his defense. Al-Jumeii cited Jawad's lack of written approval to air the footage as grounds to dismiss the case. The defense also claimed that LBC staffers brought the various contraband sex toys to

the apartment without permission.

What is certain is that the case will put wind in the sails of the most conservative elements of Saudi Arabia. According to Asma Alsharif of Reuters, clerics will be calling for strict punishments to curb any further "vice" among Saudi youth.

Subsequently, the case will likely harm the liberal movement in Saudi Arabia, which has been pushing for more reform and freedom in the Kingdom. Telegraph says that even Al-Watan, a typically pro-reformist newspaper, strongly denounced both Jawad and "Bold Red Line" for hosting him.

Dirty Talk Offices Shut

Saudi officials have shuttered the Jeddah office of LBC, which recently aired a scandalous program, reports BBC News. The region was shocked last month by an interview with Mazen Abdul Jawad, a Saudi man who "talked about his sexual conquests and how he picks up women in the kingdom," along with showing audiences his sex toys.

The program on which Jawad appeared, was intended to address taboo topics in conservative Saudi society and goes by the name "Bold Red Line." LBC offices in other Saudi cities are also being closed by authorities, according to BBC.

Although BBC quotes a Saudi information ministry spokesman as saying, "[the offices were shut] because of the interview with Mazen Abul Jawad," Arab News claims the Ministry of Information and Culture has cited "operating without a license" as the reason behind the shutdown. "The office had been working without license for the past three years," an anonymous source told Arab News.

The offices are to remain closed indefinitely, says the Associated Press.

Two friends of Jawad have also

been arrested, according to Agence France-Presse, although authorities are "currently studying which charges to lodge." AFP also reports that the doors of the LBC offices were "sealed with red wax" and posted with signs indicating closure by the information ministry.

"More than 200 people have filed legal complaints against [Jawad]... and many Saudis say he should be severely punished," writes The Guardian. Pre-marital sex and sexual relations as or with a minor are both major crimes in religiously conservative Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi Gazette reports that the Riyadh office of LBC has been closed as well, although previous reports stated the office was correctly licensed.

TV Show Host Evades Authorities

The host of a television show in Lebanon is asking for moral support in a controversy that seems more like the plot for a political thriller than the life of a television anchor.

The Daily Star reports that Ghada Eid, a presenter for New TV in Beirut, evaded authorities who arrived at the station to arrest her during a live broadcast of her show "Al-Fasad" ("Corruption") last Friday. Police surrounded the New TV studios, warrant in hand, but refrained from actually entering during the show. Naharnet News further observes that they followed the special police procedures for entering media stations.

Eid escaped for an unspecified location, and she has not disclosed how she was able to leave the building without the knowledge of the arresting officials, says the Daily Star.

Eid is facing slander charges due to two episodes of her program. On one episode, Eid was outspoken about the death of her cousin,

assassinated Phalange Party official Nasri Marouni, and on another she accused candidates of buying votes during the parliamentary elections in June, according to another article in the Daily Star.

New TV is now asking for support and “solidarity” with Eid, and has stated that she will return to her broadcast this week, writes the Daily Star. An unnamed source also told the Star that a “solidarity rally” is being planned at the station during her broadcast this week.

The station claims Eid was victim to “vengeful, unfair measures... on the station and its employees, in order to limit their independence and prevent hem from relaying people’s complaints,” the Star quotes a statement released by New TV.

Eid said after the arrest attempt that she is “not above the law,” but has “the right to object to any form of legal action taken [against her] that does not adhere to the [legal] norms,” and maintains the warrant was “a mistake,” continues the Star.

This Movie Brought to You by Hamas

“Imad Aqel,” which recently premiered in the Gaza strip, is the first feature film produced by the Islamist Hamas movement, reports Reuters. The film’s title is the name of a Palestinian militant whom Israel held accountable for the deaths of 13 soldiers and settlers.

The audience clapped and cheered as the lead actor delivered the most important line of the movie: “To kill Israeli soldiers is to worship God.” Movies featuring similar sentiments are now entering a genre newly created by Hamas-- the “Cinema of Resistance.”

“Imad Aqel” was filmed on a set built inside the former Jewish settlement of Ganei Tal in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, according to Reuters. The movie, which cost US\$120,000 and was written by Hamas senior leader Mahmoud Zahar, depicts Hamas’ founding in the 1980’s and the signing of the Oslo peace accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993.

Four of the actors in the film, which took several months to tape, were subsequently killed in the 22-day offensive Israel launched in the Gaza Strip last December, notes Asharq-Alawsat. Majed Jendeya, the movie’s German-trained director, said he hoped to screen the film at the Cannes film festival in France. Asharq Al-Awsat adds, “The movie is Hamas’ latest foray into the mass media-- it owns a satellite TV channel, a radio station and several newspapers.”

“It’s Hamaswood instead of Hollywood,”

Fathi Hamad, Interior Minister of Hamas

Hamas officials said their members were tired of ineffective rocket launches, and the group was switching to engage in a more cultural struggle, notes The Huffington Post. Fathi Hamad, the interior minister for Hamas explained, “It’s Hamaswood instead of Hollywood,” and emphasized that Hamas wants to make quality art.

Hamad further told reporters, “Resistance can be a word, a poem.” Works sponsored by Hamas include poetry, plays and an art exhibit. Most of the works focus on the hardships of life in Gaza.

The initiative reflects the growing battle fatigue among Hamas fighters, comments Dina Kraft for The Telegraph. The movie was already in production before the Israeli assault on Gaza at the start of the year.

Hezbollah TV Makes a Comeback in Australia, Sparking Protests

Al-Manar TV, which has been banned twice from broadcasting in Australia, has been given permission to restart after an investigation found it did not in fact breach the country’s anti-terrorism standard, reports The National.

The decision by the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) outraged Jewish groups, who said they were less concerned with the station promoting terrorism than its “vicious anti-Semitism.” Al-Manar TV is based in Lebanon, owned and operated by Hezbollah and considered a mouthpiece for the group.

Al-Manar TV’s programs endorse suicide bombers, call for Israel’s annihilation, and refer to Jews as the offspring of pigs and apes. The network is banned in France, Germany, Spain and the UK.

ACMA has twice stopped Al-Manar -- popular with the Arabic-speaking community, who receive it by satellite -- from being broadcast into Australia. In 2004 the agency stopped a Sydney provider from transmitting Al-Manar as part of an Arabic-language package, and introduced an ‘anti-terrorism’ standard in 2006. In January of last year a Thai company also ceased broadcasting Al-Manar at ACMA’s request.

Executive Council of Australian Jewry president Robert Goot said Al-Manar

is “viciously anti-Semitic and interlaced anti-Israel and anti-US rhetoric with medieval anti-Semitic stereotypes, including the infamous blood libel.”

Australian Arabic Council chairman Roland Jabbour argued the Arabic Council opposed anti-Semitism, and the issues with Al-Manar have nothing to do with anti-Semitism, although they are often “twisted” to appear that way.

However, according to Press TV, the increasing popularity of Hezbollah throughout the world has spurred the return of Al-Manar to Australian screens. While the decision is causing outrage among Jewish groups, Jabbour has welcomed it, saying Al-Manar is “unrelated to terrorism or anti-Semitism.”

New Laws Aim to ‘Protect’ Journalists in Iraq

The Iraqi government is in the midst of drafting a set of laws which it claims will protect local journalists, although media watchdog groups are condemning the legislation as thinly veiled censorship, reports the Agence France-Press.

Government officials in Baghdad insist the laws would cement protections for anonymous sources, punish anyone who attacks a member of the press, and guarantee a system of reparations to be awarded to journalists and their families who suffer major injury or death as a result of their profession.

However, the legislation also includes vague language prohibiting reporters from using the media to “compromise the security and stability of the country ... or to achieve a personal benefit that may be detrimental to others, or plagiarize ideas,” notes AFP.

The wording of the legislation is

troubling to Iraq’s press corps. “We are afraid of any ambiguous additions which may restrict journalists. We will be there in parliament when the discussions happen, and we will try to convince them,” comments Muaid Al-Lami, head of the Iraqi Journalists’ Syndicate, in an article by Reuters.

“We are fully committed to making Iraq a free and democratic country. But we also face some of the most extraordinary security threats of any country in the world.”

An aide to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki.

Iraqi media have expressed their concern regarding undefined details of the legislation, such as the caveat surrounding anonymous source protection. According to the text, sources must be revealed if “the law requires the source is revealed.” Equally worrisome is a waiver on press freedom if publications “threaten citizens or make provocative or aggressive statements,” continues Reuters.

Spokesmen for the government nonetheless maintain the laws are aimed at protecting journalists in a country where the profession claims dozens of lives a year.

“We are fully committed to making Iraq a free and democratic country. But we also face some of the most extraordinary security threats

of any country in the world and have to be prepared to confront these threats at any level,” an aide to Prime Minister Maliki said according to the Wall Street Journal.

The Journal continues to explain that it is unlikely the laws will actually be passed, as the legislature is currently in a state of deadlock.

“So many articles in this law go against what it means to have a free civil society, against the fundamental principles of liberty, and even against our own constitution,” said Alaa Talibani, a Kurdish member of parliament who was on a committee that drafted more legislation to “give the government extraordinary control over Iraqi NGOs,” continues the Journal.

“We are afraid that once the government starts blocking Web sites to protect the morality of society, or taking other small steps to restrict democratic liberties, it is sure to soon include others,” finishes Saad Eskander, director of Iraq’s National Archives and Library.

New Degree of Interactivity through Satellite Channels

ShooFeeTV, the premier provider of TV-related entertainment in the Arab World, recently launched its free-to-air satellite channel on ArabSat, reports AME Info. The first of its kind in the Middle East, the channel brings viewers programs from over 120 free-to-air and paid satellite channels with content like entertainment news and celebrity gossip, video clips, and photography.

The channel’s ‘Interactive’ section brings viewers a host of entertaining games, competitions, polls and quizzes.

ShooFeeTV founder and CEO Amjad Tadros told AME Info, “ShooFeeTV serves as a high-end guide for television fans across the region, offering its content through various media which, in addition to the newly-launched channel, includes an interactive website at www.shoofeetv.com, newspaper listings, podcasts and a number of mobile services as well.”

ShooFeeTV’s satellite channel began broadcasting from Jordan Media City early in July.

Abu Dhabi Goes Gaming

The Abu Dhabi Media Company (ADMC) is branching out into online gaming through a joint venture with Gazillion Entertainment, a California-based specialist in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), reports C2I Media. The venture is to co-develop the United Arab Emirates’ first MMOG studio at a purpose-built facility.

The objective of the venture is to grow the indigenous gaming industry while also ensuring that local talent is employed in the country. Robert Hutter, CEO of Gazillion, added, “MMO games are an increasingly significant part of the media landscape worldwide.”

Gazillion specializes in so-called “massively multiplayer” online games, which let thousands of players interact over the Internet simultaneously, explains Taiwan News. Online gaming is the fastest growing media sector worldwide, with revenues expected to increase from US\$8 billion (Dh29.3bn) in 2008 to \$14bn in 2012, according to Pricewaterhouse Coopers.

The joint venture will see several young Emiratis engage in creating content specifically for Arabic games, says Digital Productions Middle East. The students will be “given the

opportunity to generate games content that is meaningful to the Arab world.” Internship and employment schemes will begin in Abu Dhabi in 2010 with opportunities for training placements overseas at Gazillion offices.

The first game in Arabic slated to be released from the new studio is an MMOG based on the popular character ‘Majid,’ executive director of Digital Media Group at ADMC Ricky Ghai stated according to Digital Productions.

“Online gaming is the fastest growing media sector worldwide and is estimated to be worth US \$13bn by 2013. ADMC is taking significant steps forward to scale up its market growth and capabilities by entering this joint venture,” Ghai commented.

H.E. Mohamed Khalaf Al-Mazrouei, chairman of ADMC, added that with the joint venture ADMC “is charting new growth in the creation of digital media content and technologies.” He further expressed his hopes that the joint venture would eventually develop a path towards creating Arabic-language content for the Arab gaming market.

Students from Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in Abu Dhabi will benefit from employment opportunities and on-the-job internship programs at the junior college in Abu Dhabi, a direct result of the collaboration begun earlier this year between ADMC and HCT, reports AME Info.

Dr. Tayeb Kamali, Vice Chancellor of the Higher Colleges of Technology, emphasized the importance of educating, training and developing young UAE nationals to lead this new and exciting industry. “The Higher Colleges of Technology commit to provide continuing professional development for all employees of Abu Dhabi Media Company as and when required,” he said.

Despite the current economic

downturn, the video game industry has been acknowledged as one of the key growth areas for the media sector, exploding home gaming entertainment into the mainstream, remarks AME Info.

In just the four years since its inception in 2005, Gazillion has developed powerful global gaming platforms with prestigious partners including Marvel and LEGO. A trend-savvy, youth-minded San Mateo, CA based studio, Gazillion has quickly earned a reputation for innovation, attracting an experienced management team and high quality talent.

Young Entrepreneurs Use Internet to Explain Society

Young people in the Middle East are once again pushing the bounds of traditional media through the internet, reports CNN. The article highlights Esra’a Al-Shafei, a 23-year-old college graduate who started a website where Muslim youth can “show a different side of our religion,” one that has been lost in media coverage of extremist activities and fundamentalism.

Al-Shafei told CNN that she had grown frustrated by Arab and Western media, which she says were both “sticking to the extremes.”

Al-Shafei is in good company with a group of Saudi youths who have started their own campaign to battle misperceptions of Islam and Saudi society specifically, reports Al-Arabiya. Their campaign, which is chiefly over the internet, is aimed at convincing Western media outlets that their representation of Saudi Arabia is too unfavorably biased.

“The campaign is not after imposing censorship on journalists,” official

spokesman Amgad Al-Manif told Al-Arabiya. “We are not against freedom of expression. We are against incorrect information, which defeats the purpose of journalism.”

Both of these initiatives have been

“We are not against freedom of expression. We are against incorrect information, which defeats the purpose of journalism.”

Amgad Al-Manif, youth campaign spokesman.

organized by young Arabs, although they are aimed at convincing an older and more established audience who may not be as internet-savvy as the founders’ peers. But, according to Gulf News, online access in the Middle East will soon be easier for many more users thanks to new technology which will allow website addresses in the Arabic alphabet.

Until now, URLs have not been possible in languages that do not use the Latin alphabet. By 2010, web addresses should be available even in non-alphabetic scripts, such as Chinese, and right-to-left script such as Arabic, reports Gulf News.

Highlighting the role that Arab youth are playing online in shaping their societies, blogger Jameel Theyabi writes about a recent study from Cairo University which “notes that the youths of Facebook in Egypt have succeeded in bringing a new and unfamiliar generation from the civil society organizations in the Egyptian reality, and that this generation will become able to do what it

wants, and introduce the changes it aspires for in the near future.”

Theyabi continues that while acknowledging criticism of Facebook as ‘immoral’ and inciting insurrection, the study concludes that, “Facebook is a new way to impose democracy in terms of the virtual self that cannot be controlled, through meeting in a space that cannot be besieged... By exchanging ideas and thoughts, they live in an atmosphere of digital democracy, where they develop a democratic ideology inside their non-democratic countries.”

This view is upheld by other bloggers, such as Evgeny Morozov at Foreign Policy, who cites renewed efforts by the US to combat internet censorship in undemocratic societies. “Usually there are many more talented people opposing the dictators,” he writes. “So my bet has been that the “good guys” will always be a few steps ahead.”

Mitchell is Trying, Israel is Tiring

For the past 190 days George Mitchell, US Special Envoy to the Middle East, has traveled to and from the region to push for a comprehensive peace plan. According to the New York Times, Mitchell has not achieved any breakthroughs.

Mitchell argues that President Obama’s push for peace is not stalled, and Martin S. Indyk, Former Ambassador to Israel and peace negotiator in the Clinton administration, claims “We’re at a crucial moment now... There are only so many visits George Mitchell can make.”

Mitchell’s negotiations have taken place in mostly closed-door sessions, with Mitchell making few comments to the press. The Special Envoy to the Middle East explains in an editorial for the New York Times that “one

of the public misimpressions is that it’s all been about settlements.”

He argues that is an inaccurate perception, since the US is “asking everybody to do things.” Another misperception, which Mr. Mitchell addresses, is that the Arab countries are rejecting Obama’s request for them to normalize relations with Israel.

The New York Times claims that recent reports in Israeli media demonstrate that the Obama administration’s pressure is alienating Israelis. Israeli public opinion towards Obama has been skeptical since the address in Cairo and has recently declined because of tension over settlements.

Israel Opinion argues, “There has

“There has been no official US address of realities on the ground. What is being said during these political visits and what is actually taking place on the ground ... are vast oceans apart..”

Israel Opinion editorial.

been no official US address of realities on the ground. What is being said during these political visits and what is actually taking place on the ground to promote regional peace, are vast oceans apart.”

Despite all US efforts, there is still little evidence of change in Arab opinion towards Israel. For

example, Israel Opinion cites Hamas publications, especially those for children, which still promote hatred of Israel and Jewish people. Israel Opinion argues that in order to achieve a truly “comprehensive of peace” between Israel and her neighboring countries, the Arab media must embrace Mitchell’s vision of peace and this clearly has not yet happened.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, appears unconvinced that “confidence-building” gestures can lead to more substantive negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The US recommends confidence-building initiatives such as the opening of Arab commercial offices in Tel Aviv and allowing Israel’s state airline, El Al, to fly over Arab countries in order to reduce flight times to Asia.

But Mitchell insists that in his private meetings, with more than a dozen Arab leaders, progress is being made. Mitchell argues in his Times editorial that the Saudis “want to be helpful. They, like everyone we’re talking to, want a peace agreement that will lay the foundation for the end of this conflict.”

The New York Times reports that within the next few weeks the White House will begin a public relations campaign in Arab countries and Israel to better explain Obama’s plans for a comprehensive peace agreement involving Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab world.

The campaign, which will include interviews with Mr. Obama, aims to reframe US policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, some analysts believe the US must further increase its public diplomacy efforts, especially in Israel, where Obama has yet to meet with the Israeli president. Obama must lay out his broad strategy to the Israeli people in a persuasive manner.

According to the Times, the Obama administration will aim for a peace conference in the fall. Analysts conclude that the greatest

challenge for the US in the peace agreement will be persuading both sides to act simultaneously, when each wants to see the other act first.

Dog Days for Daughter of Sadat

Teen comedies have rarely been accused of being ‘tasteful,’ but at least one woman in Egypt says the recent summer flick “I Love You, Man” has gone too far. The “goofy” American comedy, recently released in Egypt, features a pet dog which the main character has named Anwar Al-Sadat, writes Sarah El-Deeb for the Associated Press.

Rokaya Sadat, daughter of the Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Egyptian president, is not amused.

“This is a disaster, a serious affront,”

“The truth is that no fleeting reference in a film can or will detract from his legacy.” .”

Margaret White, US Embassy spokeswoman.

El-Deeb quotes Sadat’s lawyer. The scenes involving the offending dog were removed for the Arab release of the film, but were nonetheless discovered and published on an Egyptian website.

El-Deeb goes on to point out that the scene is especially insulting to Arab sensibilities because according to the laws of Islam dogs are considered particularly unclean, and “calling someone a dog is one of the worst insults in the Middle East.”

Rokaya Sadat is now suing the Egyptian Minister of Information Anas Feqi for allowing the movie to be released in Egyptian theaters, despite the exclusion of the offending scene, according to the Los Angeles Times blog Babylon & Beyond. She is seeking for the movie to be banned and all copies of it confiscated.

Sadat’s suit claims that the film “has crossed all the constitutional lines for freedom of speech, adding that such production presents an insult to her father as well as the whole country,” continues the blog. Sadat has gained a reputation for intensely opposing any criticism or libelous claims against her father.

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry has also asked for an apology from DreamWorks Pictures, who produced the film, says The National. Additionally, Sadat has filed formal complaints with the US Embassy in Cairo.

“We sympathize with those members of his family and with Egyptians who feel offended by this Hollywood movie, but the truth is that no fleeting reference in a film can or will detract from his legacy,” The National quotes Margaret White, a spokeswoman for the US Embassy.

The National goes on to cite several critics and media professionals who are speaking out against the film and who claim the scenes are “horrific and racist,” “a crime and very rude,” and even “punishable by international laws.”

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