

# The Layalina Review

## On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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### DoD Misinformed on Information Operation Budget

The Pentagon's operations budget, dubbed as a propaganda budget by some on the Hill, seems to have gotten its own information wrong regarding funding, reports Politico. Last summer, the Department of Defense requested 998 million dollars when it actually needs 626.2 million dollars.

Allegedly, the confusion stemmed from military's estimates of requirements on the ground to use television and the internet to carry out further Information Operations in Afghanistan. However, critics argue that there is too little coordination concerning the expenditures and question the effectiveness of contracts focused on the Internet or television advertising, especially in places like Afghanistan where most people do not have Internet access or a television.

The Pentagon's request describes the Information Operation as running a broad range of undertakings, from electronic warfare to psychological operations. The news site explains that the focus is exclusively overseas, chiefly in combat areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where US troops must contend with anti-American information campaigns.

The House cut the budget by half shortly after top-level officials admitted to the error in the budget, adding to the "misgivings" of Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., the chairman of the House Defense Appropriations subcommittee. Murtha "views the ever-expanding Information Operations budget as a hangover from Donald Rumsfeld's years and a propaganda machine ill-suited for uniformed military."

This confusion in the budget amount is ill-timed since both the Pentagon and

State Department are concerned about losing money and reduced the budget which would fund operations to win popular support in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Politico stresses that nonetheless, IO costs have soared. "Even the greatly reduced \$626.2 million estimate for 2010 is more than double the \$244.6 million the Pentagon estimates it spent in 2007," points out the news site.

Murtha, who served in the Marines, declared he would like to see Information Operations moved from the Defense Department to the State Department, according to Times of the Internet.

Rep. Murtha admits to being uncomfortable with the military involved in what he calls "propaganda business," and he would rather have State take the lead, although it cannot "ramp up fast enough to handle the task this coming year."

He further points out that DoD is too aggressive on Information Operations, and while major portions of the budget are classified, fabricated stories published in foreign press are exposed as US government hoax, jeopardizing US credibility.

A House Appropriations Committee report justified the \$500 million cut in July, arguing, "At face value, much of what is being produced appears to be United States military and, more alarmingly, nonmilitary, propaganda, public relations and behavioral modification messaging."

The report continued, "The committee questions the effectiveness of much of the material being produced with this funding, the supposed efforts to minimize target audience knowledge of United States government sponsorship of certain production materials and the ability of the department to evaluate the impact of these programs."

Still, Murtha maintains that there is too little oversight as to how the money is

distributed and that the inflated budget, despite DoD's recognition of the error, is another example of the department's inefficiency. "They were so far off with the number, and then we get into the details of what's going on. We want to know exactly how you spend the money, where do you spend it, how you [would] have such an impact," he argues.

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# Obama and the Nobel Prize: Not Such a Peaceful Debate

When President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, he announced that it was not to be taken as recognition of his own achievements, but rather “as an affirmation of American leadership on behalf of aspirations held by people in all nations,” reports The New York Times.

Mr. Obama is the third sitting US president to receive the international accolade. In his acceptance speech, Obama reiterated that he was far from achieving his goals, namely tackling global warming or brokering a peace in the Middle East. “Related to the question of whether his record justified the award was the notion of whether Mr. Obama, to some degree, remains as much a symbol as a flesh-and-blood political leader,” continues The New York Times.

The chairman of the Nobel Prize Committee explained that he singled out Obama’s efforts on nuclear disarmament, particularly at the previous UN Security Council meeting, as deserving of recognition, according to Reuters. The Norwegian Committee praised the president for “his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples,” also citing his outreach to the Muslim world.

Some analysts also saw the prize as a final slap in the face for the Bush Administration from the European establishment, which resented what they called cowboy diplomacy” in world affairs. US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley told reporters the prize could stimulate diplomacy.

However, James Carafano notes for NPR, “public diplomacy, nuclear disarmament, working through the United Nations and reaching out to the Islamic world were all put forward as hallmarks of the Obama way”, which possibly places the American president in a difficult position.

Carafano argues that Obama now may be obliged to show tangible results, leaving little room for mishaps. He points out,

“Those he needs to cooperate with can now demand a pretty high price for playing ball.”

Hady Amr and Steven W. Barnes concur for McClatchy that the prize also represents an opportunity for the President to build on his recent efforts to foster dialogue with Muslim communities.

Amr and Barnes comment that Shimon Peres, president of Israel and former co-recipient of the peace prize, said “Obama (has) captured the world’s attention and given its people hope for a better future.” Meanwhile, Khaled al-Batsh, a leader of the radicalized Islamic Jihad in Gaza, told Reuters on the day of the announcement, “Why should Obama be given a peace prize while his country owns the largest nuclear arsenal on earth and his soldiers continue to shed innocent blood in Iraq and Afghanistan?”

*“If one looks for it, they would not find the major peaceful achievement that US President Barack Obama [has] made,”*

*Lebanese Member of Parliament Walid Jumblatt.*

Both authors believe, however, that such comments “ring hollow” and that the international accolade stresses the “tremendous importance of the mindset and language of dialogue that he exemplifies.”

Many people in the Arab world agree with the authors’ praise. The initial reaction from the Arab world was “overwhelmingly positive,” according to Voice of America. Middle Eastern leaders such as the former Egyptian Foreign Minister and Arab League Secretary-General Esmet Abdel Meguid, who was involved in Middle East peace talks for many years, said that Mr. Obama’s award appears to be a positive development for peace in the region.

Saudi Arabia also praised the award, with Al-Watan, an influential Saudi daily noting, “Mr. Obama won the Peace prize for his overtures to the Arab and Islamic world, and especially for his June address at Cairo University.”

The general manager for Al-Arabiya Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed explains in an Op-ed for Asharq-Alawsat how he believes that Obama deserved the award for propagating the idea of co-existence and peace between the Western and Muslim sides.

He adds, “Even the extremist groups in the region have been forced to mitigate their hostile tones after they discovered that the Arabs trust him till now.”

Yet, despite VOA’s claims of a positive reaction, other members of the Arab press beg to differ.

Habib Shaikh contends for the Saudi Gazette that the prize generated “mixed responses from Saudis and expatriates in the Kingdom.”

Tarek A. Mishkhas, executive editor at Urdu News, stated, “It is too early for such a prize.” Mishkhas explained that Obama’s aims are great in theory, but he has to “push for what he promises such as a two-state solution for Palestine and lasting peace in the Middle East.”

The Prize also sparked polarized reactions in Lebanon where many feel he has not yet earned one of the world’s most prestigious awards, reports The Daily Star. According to the Beirut-based news site, many in Lebanon expressed concern that Obama has been presented the prize in the absence of any concrete results in the region.

“[It is] premature – the intention is there but the results aren’t. Things are at no level, neither negative nor positive,” comments Dany Moussa, a web developer based in the Metn. He added that the president “hadn’t reached the level of achievement needed yet and failure remains a possibility.”

Some argue that the Nobel committee intended the prize as an encouragement rather than a reward for the leader, who still faces many challenges on the international stage. “The award will only help make the relationship better between the Muslim world and the US,” says Josiane, a teacher from Byblos.

Finally, Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader MP Walid Jumblatt criticized granting a Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama, saying the latter hasn't made any peaceful achievement in the Middle East. "If one looks for it, they would not find the major peaceful achievement that US President Barack Obama made," Jumblatt wrote in PSP's *Al-Anba* weekly newspaper.

## State Department "Pokes" the Middle East and North Africa

On September 25, the State Department announced the launch of a program to increase civic participation in the Middle East and North Africa, reports Information Week. The pilot program is part of a long-term effort to help bring democracy to the region, with a preference toward using existing technologies and social media platforms.

The program intends to "expand the availability of social networking and new media capabilities in the Middle East and North Africa," reports Gautham Nagesh for the Public Intelligence Blog. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the program's sponsor, is pledging up to 5 billion dollars in grants to five organizations.

The State Department added that priority will be given to organizations that use existing social media platforms to provide a free exchange of ideas in Middle Eastern and North African societies.

Developing an infrastructure that will allow for the free exchange of ideas is probably the first step towards crafting a sustainable democracy. George Washington University professor Henry Farrell called the program a "sophisticated and interesting approach" to 21st century diplomacy and democracy-building.

This program is one of several public diplomacy initiatives launched by officials within the Obama Administration.

Mitch Wagner at Information Week quotes Craigslist founder Craig Newmark,

who also likes the program. Newmark stated that it is designed to give people "a voice, from the bottom up, about how their countries should be governed." He also declared, "We're serious about the practice of democracy, again."

A more immediate concern may be what happens to those individuals who choose to embrace the tools despite resistance from their governments.

However, Farrell also warned about the repercussions of such an initiative. He said, "It's politically riskier, there's no guarantee what people are going to say when they have the capability." The GWU professor also considered possible reactions of foreign governments, which may construe the program as meddling with their respective national policies.

In Nagesh's NextGov article, he reminds readers of the possible ramifications for those in the Middle East and North Africa who will use the new media capability as a tool of resistance. Nagesh points to the uprising during the previous Iranian election. The resulting violence, he says, is a "sobering reminder that sparking a revolution involves more than just changing your profile picture."

*"It's politically riskier, there's no guarantee what people are going to say when they have the capability."*

*Henry Farrell, George Washington University professor.*

Farrell agreed, calling the notion of a Twitter revolution a "ridiculous fantasy." He believed that this program will be conducive to a more nuanced, long-term development of a vibrant civil society throughout the region

Lending a realistic perspective to his support of the plan, Nagesh concludes, "If we're going to give people a place to voice their opposition to their country's leadership, we should probably be there to help them when those leaders decide to strike back."

## American Altruism Gone Wrong

Pakistanis reacted negatively to certain aspects of the Kerry-Lugar Bill, formally known as the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009, reports Shamshad Ahmad for The News International.

The Kerry-Lugar Bill proposed a 7.5 billion dollar aid package for economic and social development in Pakistan. The initiative sparked negative responses throughout Pakistan due to a controversial section of the bill which some Pakistani citizens perceive as an infringement on Pakistan's sovereignty.

Ahmad refers to the contentious part as "the murderous section 302..." The section calls for monitoring reports and "an assessment of the extent to which the Government of Pakistan exercises effective civilian control of the military." US officials claim that the benchmark is solely for informational purposes.

In another article for The News International, Sami Abraham recounts the responses of several US officials to the Pakistani reaction. Most of the officials expressed surprise with the overwhelmingly negative response. Chairman of the House for Foreign Relations Committee, Howard Berman, says that the opposition was "a created crisis, by people...whose goal is either to destabilize the (Pakistani) government, or challenge some of the Pakistani military's priorities."

Russia Today reports that US officials are currently preparing an explanatory statement to assert that the US does not intend to interfere with Pakistan's sovereignty.

Some experts believe that the reaction of the opposition is rooted in the volatile history of US-Pakistan relations. Ahmad

labels the bill as “another blatant example of closing [American] eyes to history.”

For the Shadow Government blog at Foreign Policy, Dan Twining asserts that the crisis in US-Pakistan relations reveals several things, one of which is Pakistan’s continued civil-military imbalance. The controversial provisions of the bill may ignite problems if the Pakistani military views civilian actions as “meddling” with its efforts.

*“[The opposition was] a created crisis, by people... whose goal is either to destabilize the government, or challenge some of the Pakistani military’s priorities.”*

*Representative Howard Berman, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman.*

In an article for Examiner.com, Jim Kouri reiterates the importance of the Pakistani military in accomplishing US national security goals. The Pakistani military is key in the battle to “close the terrorist safe haven” in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Foreign Policy’s Twining proposes an approach which takes into consideration the importance of the military. He warns that America must strengthen the civilian government “while at the same time not unduly threatening the prerogatives of the Army.”

The Boston Globe believes that the recent terrorist attacks in Pakistan have created a rare opportunity for the United States to improve relations between the two countries. The article reiterates

the need for America and Pakistan to overcome their mutual distrust and use the “common danger” to form a more mutually beneficial relationship.

However, Shamshad Ahmad believes Pakistan should develop the capacity for self-reliance. At The News International, he states, “The best thing would have been to thank the US for its generosity and concern for Pakistan’s democracy and development, and tell them that our people are not ready to accept any conditional aid.”

Despite the unfavorable responses coming from Pakistan, head of the Pakistan Caucus in the House of Representatives Sheila Jackson-Lee called upon Pakistan’s National Assembly to endorse the bill. “Pakistan has consistently been a crucial ally in the fight against Al-Qaeda, and I expect this assistance package to enhance our already strong bilateral relationship.”

## Reactions to the Goldstone Report

The Palestinian Authority’s recent decision of slowing down its efforts to pursue the Goldstone report sparked a wide range of heated responses, reports Nadia Taha for The New York Times.

South African Justice Richard Goldstone’s report on the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict accuses Israel and Gazan militants of committing war crimes. The Palestinian Authority (PA) initially pressed to advance the report to the United Nations Security Council, but withdrew its request without official explanation. Palestinians in Gaza “took to the streets” in protest against PA leader Mahmoud Abbas, says the BBC.

Many Palestinians are confused, frustrated and even outraged with the decision.

“The Palestinian party that declared, in Geneva, that it would withdraw its support from the Goldstone report behaved not as though the Palestinians needed as much support as they could get, but as though this were part of the international order,” writes Azmi Bishara for Al-Ahram. He declares that Abbas and the PA are disastrously

misguided and egotistical in their actions.

“These officials bade farewell to the liberation movement some time ago,” Bishara continues. “Their behavior in Geneva came as the definitive and impossible to miss adieu to the spirit and logic of liberation and solidarity movements.”

Many Arab news sources are speculating that the series of reversals in the Palestinian Authority’s position is due to political corruption, which has “long plagued” the organization, continues Nadia Taha on the New York Times blog At War. There have been tabloid reports that former Israeli foreign minister Ehud Barak, Mahmoud Abbas, and two of his sons all have ties to a potentially massive cellphone company investment.

Other commentators are skeptical that peace between Israel and Palestine is even feasible at present.

“This Israeli government can’t move towards peace unless there is external pressure,” Jordanian researcher and university professor Hassan Barari told Gulf News. He continued that taking substantive steps, such as suspending financial aid to Israel, might instigate domestic pressure against the Israeli government’s “obstinacy.”

Journalist and writer Patrick Seale comments for Dar Al-Hayat that Israel’s disregard for its own soft power and international image is leading to self-destruction.

*“These officials bade farewell to the liberation movement some time ago,”*

*Azmi Bishara, Al-Ahram.*

“The Goldstone report has now driven a giant nail into the coffin of Israel’s reputation by finding that, in Gaza, there was evidence that Israel committed actions

amounting to war crimes, and possibly crimes against humanity,” Seale writes.

Responding to allegations of a “biased” report, Seale also points out that Justice Goldstone himself is Jewish and a self-identified Zionist, and esteemed for his “integrity and fairness.”

In an op-ed for the New York Times, Roger Cohen says that Israel’s misguided and outdated sense of exceptionalism is undermining the nation’s prospects for the future. Cohen remarks that especially in light of the Goldstone report, Israel must “cut the posturing and deal with reality”: accepting their non-exclusive status as a nation of the world.

“The Holocaust represented a quintessence of evil. But it happened 65 years ago. Its perpetrators are dead or dying. A Holocaust prism may be distorting. History illuminates — and blinds,” Cohen observes.

Continuing this view, Zion Evrony claims in an opinion piece for Ireland’s Independent that many people anticipated the outcome of the Goldstone report. According to Evrony, Israel is ready to accept the consequences.

“The true test of democracy is how [a country] examines its own failings. Israel has opened more than 100 separate investigations into allegations of misconduct [in Gaza],” Evrony concludes.

Yet, Israeli President Shimon Peres rejected a United Nations report on his country’s incursion into Gaza as “one-sided” and “unfair” in an interview with CNN. Insisting that Israel had a right to defend itself, and adding that the UN was in danger of “supporting the terrorists instead of supporting the fight against terrorists,” Perez argued, “If you can’t fight terrorists, then ... nobody is defending us.”

Israel said its offensive in Gaza, which it called Operation Cast Lead, was designed to stop Palestinians from firing rockets and mortars into Israel from Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas. CNN points out that there is an ongoing dispute about the number of people killed in Operation Cast Lead.

Commenting on the potential threat of Iran’s nuclear program, Peres remained “typically evasive about whether Israel has

nuclear weapons.” According to CNN, many experts believe Israel does have it.

## Perception and Reality: Revitalizing America’s Image

Pop star and charity activist Bono suggested in a New York Times guest column that the award offers a chance for America to renew its international credibility and have a tangible effect in helping world concerns.

“The world sees that America might just hold the keys to solving the three greatest threats we face on this planet: extreme poverty, extreme ideology and extreme climate change. The world senses that America, with renewed global support, might be better placed to defeat this axis of extremism with a new model of foreign policy.”

Bono adds, “The Nobel Peace Prize is the rest of the world saying, ‘Don’t blow it.’ But that’s not just directed at Mr. Obama. It’s directed at all of us. What the president promised was a ‘global plan,’ not an American plan.”

*“The Nobel Peace Prize is the rest of the world saying, ‘Don’t blow it.’”*

*Bono, humanitarian activist and lead singer of U2.*

How can America reshape its image? Asks Marian Salzman for Euro RSCG. Keith Reinhard, president of Business for Diplomatic Action and chairman emeritus of DDB Worldwide, says that international exchange and tourism is an excellent tool for creating ambassadors.

“The United States is the only developed country with no federal department of tourism and no national budget for

tourist promotion,” Reinhard points out. He emphasizes the need for visa reform, more international students at American schools, and a public welcome message from President Obama and key government figures inviting international visitors.

Nicholas Cull, director of USC’s Master of Public Diplomacy Program, stresses on the USC Public Diplomacy publication the difference between words and actions. Cull describes America’s attempts avoiding the appearance of propaganda using terms like public affairs, public diplomacy, and the least toxic word at present, “engagement.”

Ultimately, Cull writes, “The danger — as with any re-branding or re-labeling — is that the product or behavior behind the label does not change. For Obama-era Global Engagement to mean more than Bush-era Public Diplomacy it needs to be more than Bush-era Public Diplomacy.”

Bono argues that Obama is not simply talking the talk. His vocal commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, “alongside the administration’s approach to fighting nuclear proliferation and climate change, improving relations in the Middle East and, by the way, creating jobs and providing health care at home, are rebranding in action.”

British diplomat Nic Hailey also notes that nation branding in the traditional propaganda sense will be inadequate, and possibly backfire, if deeds do not match words. In an October 8 talk at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, Hailey stressed, “Some diplomacy will always be secret because there will always be things that you need to do behind closed doors,” he said. “But, what I’m doing privately, secretly, needs to be consonant with what I’m saying publicly. If I’m privately, as a nation, suppressing minorities and doing bad things and torturing people and then publicly, as a nation, saying that ‘I am the beacon of human rights’, people will just laugh at me.”

A case in point is the Kerry-Lugar bill, last week, an opinion column in the Wall Street Journal on Pakistan suggested that some members of Congress risk a return to Bush diplomacy with exactly this kind of maneuver. On the one hand, the bill offers \$7.5 billion in aid to Pakistan over the next five years, with the goal of reducing violence rooted

in poverty and fueled by extremism.

On the other hand, the Journal points out, the harsh language some lawmakers want to add to the bill needlessly offends a wide number of Pakistanis it is designed to court in the first place – a “gratuitous thumb in the eye of Pakistani national pride.”

Bono insists that Obama’s commitment and enthusiasm for the Millennium Development Goals “remind the world that America is not just a country but an idea, a great idea about opportunity for all and responsibility to your fellow man... The world wants to believe in America again because the world needs to believe in America again. We need your ideas — your idea — at a time when the rest of the world is running out of them.”

## Covering Up Controversies in Egypt

Egypt’s top Islamic school, Al-Azhar, the world’s leading school of Sunni Islam, recently issued a ban on wearing the “niqab” or face veil in classrooms and dormitories of its affiliate schools and educational institutes, reports Al-Arabiya.

The news site points out that while the majority of women in Egypt wear the hijab, only few wear the niqab. The majority of Islamic scholars say the niqab is not obligatory in Islam, but is “merely a custom that dates back to tribal, nomadic societies living in the Arabian desert before Islam began.”

*“It might not be an obligation in Islam, but it is also not against Islam.”*

*Muslim Brotherhood attorney.*

The heated controversy originated during Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Mohamed

Sayyid Tantawi’s visit to a middle school, where he told a girl to remove her niqab. Tantawi told Al-Arabiya that he had explained to the girl, “the niqab was only a tradition” and said that she was required to wear only the school uniform at Al-Azhar.

Essam Derbala, a leader in the Muslim Brotherhood group, slammed both Tantawi and Egypt’s Higher Education Minister Hani Hilal. Derbala said that the niqab ban has “created a battle with no battlefield among Egypt’s female students,” further questioning whether Tantawi should remain at his post.

A Muslim brotherhood lawyer, representatives of Egypt’s lower house of parliament, and the Sawaseya Center for Human Rights joined forces to file a lawsuit against Sheikh Mohammad Sayyed Tantawi, according to another article in Al-Arabiya. The lawsuit is being brought on charges over what they called his “unconstitutional” ban that violates personal freedom and contradicts the principle of equality for all citizens.

The group also sought action against Egypt’s minister of higher education. “We have a ruling from the Supreme Administrative Court to the effect that women have the right to wear the niqab,” Muslim Brotherhood lawyer, Abdel-Moneim Abdel-Maqsoud, told Al-Arabiya.

“It might not be an obligation in Islam, but it is also not against Islam. So, women have the right to wear it when and where they choose,” Abdel-Maqsoud argued, adding that they would continue to fight until the court overturns the ban.

Al-Azhar’s Deputy Chairman, Mohamed Abdel-Aziz, slammed the Muslim Brotherhood and said that they do not have the right to file lawsuits since they are an “outlawed group.” He added that the matter was an internal policy that the group has “no right to object to.”

Female students also took to the streets in Cairo, demonstrating against Al-Azhar’s ban, reports BBC. The news site points out that the niqab is worn by an increasing number of women, which indicates that religious and social conservatism is growing in Egypt.

Mar Mohammed runs Nur Moda (Women’s Fashions) in one of the busiest merchant streets of Cairo. After being

in the business for twenty years, he explained, “I have never sold as many niqabs,” he told BBC reporter Christian Fraser. “A hundred, 120 a day,” he said, “no problem.” His assistant, Heba, wears the niqab. “The sheikh won’t affect my decision to wear it,” she said. “I feel more relaxed in this. Men aren’t looking at me. I feel closer to God.”

BBC recalls the “pro-niqab” spam campaign that circulated around Cairo by e-mail last year. “A veil to protect or eyes will molest!” it warned. The sociologist Said Sadeq of the American University in Cairo pointed to the influence of Salafism, an ultra-conservative school of thought in Islam.

Contrary to the traditional Western ideas that women are sociologically repressed and pressured into wearing the niqab, Hossam Bahgat, one of Egypt’s prominent human rights campaigners, argued that many of them are actually well educated and intelligent women “who follow a version of Islam that requires them to cover up in the presence of men.”

The article concludes that religion has become a divisive point in Egypt, splitting the country apart.

## Battle of the Media between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Asserting its influence on Middle Eastern politics and power relations, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad accused “Western powers” of wielding the media for “full-fledged psychological attacks as a lever to influence nations against their better judgment,” reports Press TV.

The media’s ability to shape the relationship between Iran and other nations has been increasingly analyzed and exploited in the weeks prior to the first significant negotiations between Iran and Western powers. Press TV further antagonizes this divide by referring to “Western powers” throughout the article.

Indirectly referring to Israel and the US, Ahmadinejad alleged that media campaigns led by “some regimes” has become “the prime weapon-of-choice

against other countries” to advance their political agenda rather than properly report on Iranian affairs.

Khalil Sheikh, writing for the Daily 49er, laments the “aggressive right wing rhetoric,” and the lack of factual analysis of Middle Eastern politics that led many people to be “blind under the umbrella of misconception that Iran is a threat to the ‘free world.’”

Ahmadinejad’s comments coincided with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) takeover of Iran’s telecommunications monopoly, reports the New York Times. The acquisition “amplified concerns in Iran over what some call the rise of a pseudo-government.”

The Guards, whose mandate is to “protect the revolution,” oversee Iran’s nuclear and missile program. According to the New York Times, the Guards tightened their political and economic control following this summer’s elections.

*“It’s not just a matter of the Guards dominating the economy, but of controlling the state.”*

*Alireza Nader, Iran expert.*

It remains unclear as to whether the takeover of the telecommunications industry will significantly impact Iranian media or foreign policy. Some analysts believe that the Guards’ growing influence will further hamper opening up to the West.

“It’s not just a matter of the Guards dominating the economy, but of controlling the state,” commented Alireza Nader, an expert on Iran. Any integration on a global scale would require greater transparency, which the Guards are averse to do since it may imply having to relinquish some of their control.

On the eve of major negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, experts are extensively scrutinizing President Obama’s policies

Daniel Greenfield, writing for Canada Free Press, asserts that Obama’s policies toward Iran are driven by the “concerns of Saudi Arabia.” In Greenfield’s opinion, Saudi Arabia is mainly concerned with its Sunni influence in the Middle East jeopardized by Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons.

“Muslim holy wars that are fought against other Muslims are often indirect,” writes Greenfield. “The Sunni powers in the Middle East understand that when Ahmadinejad talks about destroying Israel, he only means destroying Israel first, and then second... Israel is not the endgame, they are.”

According to Greenfield, Obama’s policy of “soft power, engagement and appeasement” arises directly from Saudi influence that seeks to defuse the Iranian threat “without war or any democratization or regional political instability that might rebound back in Riyadh.” Consequently, “Obama is dithering on Iran, because the Saudis are dithering on Iran,” a policy direction rejected by Greenfield.

The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is epitomized by that various accusations that Iranian and Saudi Arabian media outlets have exchanged since the contested 2009 Iranian presidential elections, writes the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI).

Iranian television channels allege that Saudi media is “waging an anti-Iran campaign in coordination with Israel in the West,” and that Saudi Arabia is an “absolutist dictatorship” with “no status whatsoever in the Islamic world.”

In response, Saudi papers have accused Al-Qaeda of being an “Iranian front organization,” whose operations are primarily designed to benefit Iran. Iran’s nuclear ambitions and “alleged aspirations to take over the Middle East” are repeatedly condemned and the Saudi daily Al-Riyadh called on Arabs to protect themselves “with a force that recognizes the struggle between opposites.”

Unlike Greenfield, Iranian lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Shirin Ebadi supports a soft power approach,

according to The Washington Post. Ebadi claimed that the Obama administration has made several mistakes regarding Iran, arguing that the nature of Iran’s regime is more crucial to US security than deals on nuclear energy, because nuclear programs would not be a threat in the hands of a government that did not view America or Israel as enemies.

“If the West focuses exclusively on the nuclear issue, Ahmadinejad can tell his people that the West is against Iran’s national interest and rally people to his cause,” argued Ebadi. “But if the West presses also on its human rights record, he will find himself in a position where his popular base is getting weaker and weaker by the day.”

Obama declared that “the voice of the people needs to be heard,” she continued, “but he needs to repeat the statement again and again, so that people in Iran hear him.”

## Media Market Soaring in the UAE

Sheikh Mohammed, Vice President of the UAE, has issued another resolution chipping off another part of Arab Media Group (AMG) and handing it over to its Dubai government-backed media cousin, Dubai Media Incorporated, reports The National.

Under the agreement, all staff of the newspapers, Masar and Noor shall be transferred from AMG to Dubai Media (DMI) Incorporated.

The move transforms DMI into one of the biggest media houses in the region, as it already included Al-Bayan newspaper, Dubai TV, Sama Dubai TV, Dubai One TV, Dubai Sports Channel and Dubai Racing Channel. Ahmed Abdullah Al-Shaikh, who is both the managing director of DMI and the media escort of Sheikh Mohammed, described the resolution as a “major leap for the DMI”.

As a vestige of this heritage, it was the only part of AMG to have its advertising sold by the Choueiri Group, which sells all the ads for DMI’s budget of television channels. The National points out there is a definite consolidation process to

“rest of AMG’s newspaper properties, as well as its printing operation, over to DMI, along with Noor Dubai radio and TV, which actually seems like a great fit with DMI’s local-interest television fare.”

In other news, Arabian Business announces that after a massive shake-up within the Middle East broadcast industry, a consequential number of jobs have flooded the market in Abu Dhabi following initiative by Twofour54 and the creation of new private broadcast entities.

Notably, the launch of twofour54 Iktibar, creative lab, a grant funding scheme aimed at engaging with young Arabs and stimulating creativity in order to build a long term sustainable media industry in the Arab world, reports AME Info.

It would be a creative lab, believed to be the first creative ideas incubator in MENA to be focused on the media and entertainment sector, and provides a starting point to a viable and long term career in this dynamic industry.

Abu Dhabi is aggressively moving forward not just in terms of providing state-of-the-art facilities with industry standard end-to-end solutions for the generation and delivery of content, but also by partnering with global entities and attracting the best human resources to help make the UAE capital a centre of media excellence.

The opportunities in Abu Dhabi have created massive job opportunities for skilled personnel in the broadcast industry and substantial migration of people to the capital, especially from Dubai, according to Arabian Business.

In the meantime, the migration of several key people from Dubai-based entities has created new opportunities for others within the emirate. “Orbit-Showtime, which merged in early summer, will consolidate its operations by the end of the year,” confirms Arabian Business. Job losses are to be expected but at the same time, huge media projects in other parts of the Middle East may help absorb many skilled personnel.

If anything, these latest changes are demonstrating that media industry in the Middle East is undergoing seismic shifts, holding great potential for the future.

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