

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Hillary Clinton Renews Public Diplomacy in Pakistan

During her recent visit to Pakistan, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged a fresh start in relations with the country, an “increasingly embattled and skeptical partner” in the struggle against Islamic militancy, reports Reuters.

“We are turning the page,” Clinton told reporters as she began her first visit to Islamabad as the top US diplomat amid rising anti-American sentiment in Pakistan and an expanding US-led war in neighboring Afghanistan.

Clinton also emphasized the importance of addressing people directly and highlighted the role that investment by citizens could play. Clinton’s public diplomacy initiatives started two days prior to her departure for Pakistan where she “would seek to emphasize the common goals that the American and Pakistani peoples have in fighting religious extremism,” notes The Dawn.

While Clinton urged Pakistanis to reject extremism, which she described to be “a cancer” to society, she also emphasized the need to improve education and gender equality.

Clinton’s visit comes amid widespread Pakistani anger over a recent major US aid bill, known as the Kerry-Lugar Bill. Despite tripling assistance to Pakistan to some 1.5 billion dollars per year to be distributed over the next five years, the bill was bitterly denounced for imposing conditions, which according to critics, violate Pakistan’s national sovereignty.

“These aren’t conditions on Pakistan

so much as they are metrics for measuring whether we think our aid is being productive,” Clinton said to Reuters, noting that similar measures were used for other US aid programs.

Certain clauses from the Kerry-Lugar bill were perceived as clearly “intrusive” and “unacceptable” with an implicit attempt to micro-manage Pakistan, reports Javed Malik for The Khaleej Times. Segments of Pakistani society- including the media, the academics, political parties, and even the armed forces- reacted negatively.

Malik points out that the reaction to the bill in Pakistan is just another example of poor US public diplomacy by US policy makers. “If their goal was to ‘win hearts and minds’” of the Pakistani people, points out Malik, the policy makers are “going about it in the wrong way.”

Amidst other concerns, he notes that the rejection of the bill was also a “manifestation of the growing frustration over some US Policies which are viewed as one-sided and sometimes marred with double standards.”

Malik adds that it seems that the US “has an image and self-perception problem.” While it promotes democracy, it appears to be a nation of double standards as the unilateral US drone attacks continue inside Pakistan.

He continues, “People ask, ‘Can the United States really be our friend when its drones are attacking us and violating our country’s sovereignty?’” If the US truly wants to “positively transform” its relationship with Pakistan and win the hearts of its people, which was the real goal of the Kerry Lugar Bill, Malik comments, “Some soul searching is required.”

Among several recommendations, the author notes that Pakistanis above all are looking for the US to respect of their sovereignty. “Everyone in Pakistan wants good, positive and healthy relations with the US, but as someone once said, they

want ‘Friends not Masters,’” he writes.

Secretary Clinton sought to improve public diplomacy efforts towards Pakistan by declaring that the US government adopted a new approach which would “not leave any misstatement or inaccuracy unanswered” in order to counter extremist propaganda in Pakistan, reports The Nation.

Clinton, who says “the United States wants to ‘turn the page’ on its relationship with Pakistan,” is devoting a significant amount of energy to public diplomacy in

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an attempt to counter rising Pakistani criticism of the alliance with Washington.

She added, “We have, under Judith McHale, our Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, undertaken a very thorough analysis of what we could do better ... we intend to counter a lot of this propaganda with the best weapon we have; namely, the truth.” She also emphasized the importance of working more closely with the Pakistani media.

President Barack Obama’s administration wants to engage with Pakistan. However, the country traditionally views the United States as interested only in securing its military cooperation in the fight against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Clinton has pledged 85 million dollars to counter poverty and 125 million dollars to improve Pakistan’s woefully inadequate electricity supply. However, underscoring the complexity of the relationship between both allies, Pakistani officials are loath to publicize the aid because of the deep-seated anti-American sentiment in Pakistan, reports The New York Times.

“We intend to counter a lot of this propaganda with the best weapon we have; namely, the truth.”

Hillary Rodham Clinton, US Secretary of State.

At a military briefing, Pakistani Army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas declared that Pakistan was solely responsible for the fight in South Waziristan, saying his country is acting completely alone. “Let us finish the job on our own,” he told reporters.

“The Pakistanis insist [that there be] ‘no American face’ on their war. Period,” said one senior American military officer in Southwest Asia, who would

only speak anonymously because he did not want to jeopardize his relationship with his Pakistani counterparts.

The New York Times remarks that given the reluctance of Pakistani and American officials to speak openly about the assistance, it is difficult to assess how effective the American aid has been in current combat operations.

Goldstone Report Divides the International Community

The 575 page “Goldstone Report” on Operation Cast Lead continues to divide the international community, reports CNN. The report calls for the independent investigation of both Israel and Hamas’s respective military personnel during the offensive.

According to the news site, the United Nations Human Rights Council approved a resolution endorsing the Goldstone report and has passed it on to the UN General Assembly for further consideration.

However, the report, heralded by Israel as “anti-Semitic,” goes beyond the recent conflict in Gaza and condemns “Israeli violations of human rights in Occupied East Jerusalem, particularly the confiscation of lands and properties, the demolishing of houses and private properties, the construction and expansion of settlements, the continuous construction of the separation wall, changing the demographic and geographic character of East Jerusalem, as well as digging and excavation works in and around Al-Aqsa mosque and its vicinity.”

The report also looks to finalize the dispute regarding the number of people killed in the offensive. The Gaza-based Palestinian Center for Human Rights put the death toll at 1,419 and said 1,167 of those were “non-combatants,” while the Israeli military released its own figures earlier this year, saying that 1,166 people were killed, 60 percent of whom were “terror operatives.”

The strongest source of opposition comes from the military and political leaders of Israel and their allies, according to Jack Khoury of Haaretz. Khoury comments, “Israel has rejected the report as biased and the US has said it would support Israel’s efforts to prevent a UN Security Council debate on the report.”

Israel vehemently defended its three week offensive in Gaza, claiming that it was designed to stop Palestinians from firing rockets and mortars from Hamas-controlled areas of Gaza into Israel. Although there are some in the Israeli government who argue that an independent investigation would establish international credibility and prove the moral actions of Israel during Operation Cast Lead, many members of Israel’s defense community believe otherwise.

What Israeli President Shimon Peres has called “one-sided” and “unfair,” Defense Minister Ehud Barak has described as damaging, according to Ynet News. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has gone so far as to say that if the Goldstone report is adopted, it would deliver a “mortal blow” to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

“Despite Israel’s efforts to prevent leaks...some facts have stated to surface.”

Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, Political and Media Advisor at the Syrian Presidency.

According to Roni Sofer of Ynet News, although Russian representatives voted in favor of adopting the Goldstone report at the UN Human Rights Council meeting, “Russia has made it clear to Israel that it will oppose a Goldstone Report discussion at the United Nations Security Council or at the International Criminal Court in the Hague.”

Russian Ambassador to Israel Peter Stegney stressed that Russia feels that Israel should

investigate itself, stressing the importance of the peace process. The Sofer article also notes that Stegney slammed the Goldstone Report by saying “it includes statements that do not rely on the facts, but rather subjective estimations.”

There was also a strong opposition to the report from the United States, Italy, Holland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Ukraine- all of which voted against it at the UN Human Rights Council meeting.

The US House of Representatives has rejected the “irredeemably biased” UN-sponsored report which says Israel committed war crimes during its military assault on the Gaza Strip, reports Al-Jazeera. On Tuesday, the House voted 344 to 36 in favor of a non-binding resolution calling on Barack Obama, the US president, to maintain his opposition to the report.

The US House vote came a day before the United Nations General Assembly was expected to debate its own resolution endorsing the findings of the Goldstone report. Riyadh Mansour, the Palestinian representative to the UN, criticized the Security Council for so far failing to act “in triggering the mechanism that Goldstone wanted, the investigation, the monitoring and then reporting after six months before considering moving into the ICC.”

Steven Rothman, a Democratic congressman from New Jersey, told Al-Jazeera that the report was biased against Israel. He explained, “I did not read the 400 or 500 pages, but I read the executive summary designed for members of congress and other world leaders to read, and I found it terribly, terribly biased and one-sided.”

The influential American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobbied strongly for the latest resolution and said that it “strongly applauded” the House’s action on Tuesday.

In January, as Israel bombarded the Palestinian territory, the House had overwhelmingly backed a resolution “recognizing Israel’s right to defend itself against attacks from Israel.” Last week, South African Judge Richard Goldstone sent a letter to the US House of Representatives saying that the text of the US resolution had “factual inaccuracies and instances where information and statements

are taken grossly out of context.” Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas strongly opposed Israel’s actions in Gaza, remarks Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban for Asharq Al-Awsat. She notes, “The endorsement of the UN Human Rights Council of the [Goldstone Report] ... demonstrates that the world has changed.”

Dr. Shaaban also criticizes Israel’s PR efforts to dismiss the report as a threat to the peace process and the “random accusations of anti-Semitism.” She states, “It imposes a comprehensive media blackout, prevents politicians from criticizing it in public and prevents reporters from accessing the crime scene.”

Others such as Ibrahim Khaishi, the Palestinian Authority’s United Nations ambassador in Geneva, warned, “Our people will never forgive the international community if they leave criminals of perpetrators of crime to enjoy impunity outside the scope of justice.”

Saudi Arabia Lashes Out at the Press

A Saudi court sentenced a female journalist to sixty lashes after the Lebanese television channel she worked for aired the explicit sex confession of a Saudi man, Mazen Abdul-Jawad, reports Reuters. Rozanna Al-Yami, 22, said that the court in Jeddah convicted her on grounds that the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) “did not have proper authorization to operate in the Islamic kingdom.”

“The ruling follows the sentencing by the same court of Abdul-Jawad to five years in jail and 1,000 lashes earlier in October after he appeared [on the Bold Red Line],” according to the news site. The show sparked a public outcry in Saudi Arabia, one of the most conservative Muslim countries in the world, especially after Abdul-Jawad, a Saudi airline sales clerk spoke openly about his sexual exploits.

Abdul-Jawad was arrested shortly after the program aired. He was charged with violating Saudi Arabia’s law of publicizing vice, according to CNN.

The show triggered criticism from conservative Saudi clerics of LBC

and its progressive owner, multi-billionaire Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal. In recent years, the Prince has used his media companies, Rotana and LBC to push “hard against Saudi rules banning cinemas and music in public places,” reports Agence France Presse.

“I had nothing to do with Mazen Abdul-Jawad’s show. The verdict was just because I cooperated with LBC,” Al-Yami told Reuters. She also claims that she was unaware that LBC was unlicensed and subsequently refused to appeal the decision.

Yet, according to Arab News, Al-Yami was accused of being an accomplice to Abdul-Jawad as he also told audiences how to pick up girls and women.

Suleiman Al-Jumeii, the attorney who represents Abdul-Jawad, declared that he believes Al-Yami was the first Saudi journalist to be sentenced to lashing, reports CNN. Although Al-Jumeii doesn’t represent Al-Yami, he said that he is closely following all aspects of the cases dealing with “A Bold Red Line.”

The lawyer is attempting to pursue an appeal for his client and get his case heard in a special court that deals only with media matters. Saudi authorities shut down the Lebanese network’s offices in Jeddah and Riyadh after the interview aired a few months ago.

“Journalists should exercise some responsibility.”

Samar Fatani, Jeddah-based columnist and radio journalist.

Al-Jumeii commented in an interview with Arab News, “The verdict will gratify those people who have been striving to deactivate the committee and bring media persons to ordinary courts for prosecution.” He added that the issue in this case is not necessarily Abdul Jawad’s crimes, but rather the prosecution of the entire media.

His comment was made before his departure for Riyadh to attend a sitting of the Disputes Committee, which will examine a case against the LBC Channel. He believes that the committee will rule against the channel and mete out punishment accordingly.

Al-Jumeii is also currently trying to reverse the sentence against Abdul-Jawad.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia later pardoned Al-Yami, reports Reuters. "The king has vindicated me. I am satisfied with the king's order and I accept the decisions of the sovereign," she told the news agency after being informed of the pardon.

The Information Ministry spokesman Abdul Rahman Al-Hazzaa said that the King has requested the "transfer of the cases to the ministry of information," reports Agence France Presse (AFP).

The Information Ministry committee, which will look at both cases, usually addresses media-related matters. The committee consists of "representatives of the justice and information ministries as well as a number of journalists."

Al-Hazzaa explained to Reuters that the pardon meant the case will be reviewed by the ministry for possible disciplinary actions while the flogging of Al-Yami has been dropped.

Courts in Saudi Arabia, which implements a strict version of Islamic law, are controlled by clerics who have wide discretion in sentencing.

The pardon by the king sparked reaction across the kingdom, calling for a review of all media related cases handled by the ministry of information, remarks Muhammad Humaidan to Arab News.

Jeddah-based columnist and radio journalist Samar Fatani said that she was relieved to hear of the pardon. "It has put at ease a lot of journalists who were concerned and worried about carrying out their jobs... However, journalists should exercise some responsibility," she added.

Some hailed the pardon as a victory for the Saudi media, such as Alkhabar-based columnist and writer Abdullah Al-Alami. He interpreted the king's pardon as another step forward toward social reforms in Saudi Arabia. Yet,

Abdul-Jawad still faces five years in jail.

Hamad Al-Majed, a writer for the Saudi newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat accused the liberal elements of Saudi society of practicing "distorted freedom," reports Arab News. He argued that so-called liberals are just as authoritarian as conservative dictatorships, as they are unwilling to allow the expression of opinions that differ from their own.

Muhammad Al-Tunisi, editor in chief of Okaz, believes there are conditions attached to the freedom given to the media in the Kingdom, "the most important of which is the preservation of the social fabric and maintaining of work ethics without shaking up the stable values." He later called on media organizations to create a regulatory system.

'Blasphemous' Al-Arabiya

A case has been filed against the popular news channel, Al-Arabiya, at the summary court in Jeddah for "allegedly making fun of Islam," reports Arab News. The litigants claim the channel ridiculed God, the Prophet, angel Gabriel and the Sayings of the Prophet.

Khaled Al-Matrafi of Al-Arabiya told Arab News that he had not received any official information concerning the issue. "We have a legal department to follow up and deal with such cases," he added. The case has been transferred to the Ministry of Culture and Information in line with a Saudi publications law.

Business Maktoob explains that according to Judge Muhammad Mirdad, the lawsuit was filed by a group of citizens. The lawsuit was sent to the Saudi government to be transferred to the Ministry of Culture and Information as it relates to the media.

Saudi Arabia enforces strict Islamic law, and mocking religion or having explicit discussions about sex are not permitted in the country.

"Whenever we receive such a case we deal with it in the same way as other cases," Al-Hazzaa said to Arab News, adding that the case would be studied prior to handing it

over to the relevant committee. He added that representatives from the ministries of justice, interior and commerce were also involved in the three committees, and membership was not limited to staff from the Ministry of Culture and Information.

However, confusion remains, reports AME Info. "We have so far not received any information about a case filed by a number of citizens against the channel," Assistant Undersecretary for Local Media Abdul Rahman Al-Hazzaa stated.

Tunisian Elections Marred by Media Repression

After two decades in power, Tunisians re-elected President Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali on October 25th for his fifth term in office with 89.62 percent of the votes, reports Al-Arabiya. There were three other candidates in this presidential election, two of which have close ties to the government, and only one legitimate opposition candidate, Ahmed Brahim, who came in last place.

Many voters credit the president with steering Tunisia towards economic growth and stability in a region where other countries suffer from poverty and political turmoil, reports The Associated Press.

"It is a matter of pride that the results have confirmed the people's support for President Ben Ali and their trust in him," said Interior Minister Rafik Bel Haj Kacem. "He is the savior of our country," said 50-year-old Tunisian citizen Nejia Azouzi to Reuters as she cast her ballot in the capital.

According to Human Rights Watch, the elections took place in an "atmosphere of repression," with tight government control. The organization claims that "tailor-made laws" stood in the way of some of the stronger opposition parties and exerted constraints on freedom of expression and press, which prevented these challengers from making their case public.

Sarah Leah Whitson, the Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch, notes that "even if everything is

squeaky clean on voting day, elections will be free and fair in Tunisia only when the authorities stop muzzling opposition candidates, journalists, and dissidents.”

Despite these accusations, President Ben Ali insists that his government has “endeavored to provide for these elections all the guarantees of transparency and honesty,” and that some people are deliberately trying to damage Tunisia’s image. “The law will be applied...with rigor against anyone who spreads doubts or accusations about the integrity of the electoral process without providing hard proof,” Ben Ali said.

“Elections will be free and fair in Tunisia only when the authorities stop muzzling opposition candidates, journalists, and dissidents.”

Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director for Human Rights Watch.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) declared that a series of recent attacks and harassment suggested deliberate targeting of independent journalism in Tunisia, reports the Index of Censorship. In the few weeks prior to the elections, several journalists and bloggers were physically assaulted or arrested, foreign and local reporters were expelled from or denied entry and departure from Tunisia, some books and shows were banned, and newspapers and radio stations were raided by the police.

“We no longer have the right to express our views in Tunisia,” said Hama Hammami’s wife, an editor who was beaten by the police after criticizing the government in an interview for Al-

Jazeera. “When we dare to criticize the regime in the foreign media, we are punished by being physically attacked. This is now standard practice. They no longer need to throw people in prison.”

The head of information for Ahmed Brahim’s Ettajdid opposition party told Reporters Without Borders that the interior minister confiscated the party newspaper Al-Tariq Al-Jadid for supposedly breaching electoral media rules.

Similarly, the content of several news sources, such as the dailies As-Sabah and Le Temp, which are owned by the president’s son-in-law, gave no space to the opposition candidates, devoted more pages to cover the Head of State’s election program and sang praises for his campaign.

Reporters Without Borders reported that the election campaign did nothing to change web censorship in Tunisia by the “cyber police,” as they ranked Tunisia 154 out of 175 countries in the organization’s 2009 world press freedom rankings. The group condemned the attitude of the Tunisian authorities who prevented Tunisian journalists and foreign correspondents from doing their work.

“The police presence was permanent during this electoral period. Opposition activists, independent journalists, human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists were closely watched,” said Jean-François Julliard, secretary general of Reporters Without Borders.

While human-rights groups have made several allegations of abuse against Tunisia following the latest elections, Al-Arabiya reports that the government is sensitive about foreign criticism of the vote because it is expected to apply to the European Union next year for an “advanced status,” which could give it preferential trade terms and boost its international standing.

Culture of Censorship Still Prevails in the Arab World

Reporters Without Borders’ recent

freedom index generated negative reactions throughout the Arab world, reports Asharq-Alawsat.

Reporters Without Borders, a nongovernmental association advocating freedom of the press, released its 2009 freedom index in late October. The index measures both internal and external press freedom in countries throughout the world. According to Muhammad Diyab at Asharq-Alawsat, most Arab countries were placed in the lower rankings of the index.

Time Magazine’s analysis points out that Israel no longer has the freest press in the Middle East. According to the article, Israel’s position slipped in the rankings due to journalists’ arrests, the death of three reporters in the Gaza Strip, and “military censorship” applied to the media.

“The laws are liberal, but the implementation of the laws is also liberal.”

Tarek Mitri, Information Minister of Lebanon.

Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) lead the list of Middle Eastern countries, ranking at positions 60, 61, and 86 respectively.

Kareem Shaheen at The National remarks that the UAE’s rank fell fifteen places from the 2008 index. Soazig Dollet, head of research and media relations for Reporters Without Borders, stated, “Internet censorship in the UAE...played a major role in its fall,” referring to the government’s blocking of access to certain websites.

Dollet also commented on the UAE’s most recent draft media law, which he said “gives the government sole responsibility for deciding who is a journalist and who is not, and which media outlets can operate in the country.”

However, opinions differ regarding the cause of press repression in the Middle East. A group of Arab journalists recently called for greater press freedom in their respective countries at a two-day forum in Doha, Qatar, organized by Al-Jazeera's Public Liberties & Human Rights department and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), reports Al-Jazeera.

While they praised modern technology such as the internet for the amount of freedom it has granted some people, many of the journalists blamed Arab regimes for fostering a "censorship culture."

Some journalists acknowledged that the existing media laws are not sufficient to ensure press freedom. Nidal Mansour, the head of the Center for Defending Journalists, noted, "If we look at the constitution of each Arab country, we would find the most beautiful phrases that hail and promote the freedom of speech. On the ground, none of that is practiced."

Several other journalists suggested that the Arab public is also partly to blame for remaining passive. Ahmed Al-Sheikh, a news director at Al-Jazeera's Arabic channel argued, "[The people] must learn how to show resentment in cases [where] their rights are confiscated."

Robert Fisk at The Independent documents the declining business of newspapers in Beirut and believes that other factors are at play. He comments on external circumstances affecting the press in Lebanon, citing the Syrian military presence in Lebanon in 1976, which led some newspapers to be cautious in the tone of their publications.

Ahmad Al-Jarallah, the editor-in-chief of Al-Seyassah in Kuwait, also made a connection between external circumstances and press freedom. At Asharq Al-Awsat, Muhammad Diyab writes that Al-Jarallah sees press freedom as a "cause of a lot of problems that harm the national security of Kuwait."

May Jeong raises another problem at The Daily Star, where she points out that the absence of official data is "often discussed, yet never challenged." Jeong comments, "Not much formal statement exists in the way of sales, distribution, and circulation rates." This lack of

information also hurts the credibility of the press in the Middle East.

Regardless of the reasons for the Arab nations' low ranking on the freedom index, many Arab journalists agree that the current status of the press in the Middle East must change.

"[True press freedom] must be preceded by numerous steps throughout the different stages of life whether in the home, at school or in society. In the end, freedom of the press simply means freedom of man," concludes Muhammad Diyab.

Arab Knowledge Report Highlights Deepening Gaps

This year's Arab Knowledge Report, co-authored by the UN Development Program (UNDP) and the Mohammad bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Foundation, highlights humanitarian issues that continue to plague the Arab world, reports The National. Violent conflict, poverty, unemployment, religious and political extremism, and illiteracy are the issues that top the list.

The report criticized university education, calling it painfully lagging in specialized sciences and modern technologies, says The Media Line. The report also harshly condemned "the lack of investment in academic and scientific research."

"About 60 million persons in [Arab countries] remain illiterate... While almost nine million children of primary school age are out of school under such conditions, how can a knowledge society be built?" asked UNDP regional chief Dr. Adel Abdellatif in an interview with The National.

The report suggested that "public awareness and government action" is necessary to convince wary populations that education is integral to societal progress. "The report has highlighted a number of gaps that must be attended to seriously and resolutely if we wish to establish a society [that generates new knowledge]," continued Abdellatif.

Adel Al-Shared, Director of Mohammed Bin Rashid Leadership Development Programme in the UAE, stressed that the uneducated, unemployed, and disproportionately young population in many Arab countries is "a ticking time bomb," reports the Khaleej Times.

The Mohammad bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Foundation, which is based in Dubai, also announced a collaboration with an American charity, The Charles Edison Fund, to train teachers in the Middle East. The foundation said that the collaboration will help address the painful disparities in education singled out in the Arab Knowledge Report. Al-Shared told the Khaleej Times, "Our aim is to create innovation in education."

Expanding on this view, Dr. Ghassan Khateeb at Birzeit University told The Media Line, "This is all related to politics. The lack of democracy and lack of knowledge reinforce each other... Rulers can remain rulers without the will of the people... [so] there is less incentive to really invest in knowledge and the kinds of things that would have a positive impact on the public who would elect them."

"This is all related to politics. The lack of democracy and lack of knowledge reinforce each other."

Dr. Ghassan Khateeb, Birzeit University.

An editorial, Gulf News asserts, "All the oil in the ground and all the money in the banks will not make a difference if people choose not to use their resources to their best advantage." The opinion piece further observes, "No Arab state fell into the UN's 'low' category of human development."

"The report is right to speak out against poverty and a pervading sense of social marginalization, which have been exploited by an alarming number of 'close-

minded' interpretations of religious texts," Gulf News continues. "[It] is right to make very clear that the answers lie in social development, encouraging meaningful individual participation in society."

But some have rejected the Arab Knowledge Report for being too biased towards Western values. "The report looks at development... using the old imperialist school of thinking in which development is only defined in economic or materialistic terms," Nabil Dajani of the American University of Beirut said to The Media Line.

However, the Jerusalem Post points out that because the report was co-written by a regional foundation, the findings should be regarded as particularly significant.

"Arab countries are beginning to look inward at themselves, and thinking about how they can improve the domestic problems within their societies," Dr. Yoram Meital of Ben-Gurion University commented.

Meital also told the Jerusalem Post that he believes advancing education and development in the Arab world is possible. "Most studies say that there's nothing wrong with Islam in terms of what's preventing [Arab countries] from improving and developing in these ways," he said. "The problem is... in the decisions made by the government[s]."

"With solid commitment and long-term vision, the route to the knowledge society will not be impossible," Al-Shared added for The Khaleej Times.

The Arab Knowledge Report did have some limited praise for public knowledge in the Arab world. It observed that Internet usage is growing at a remarkable pace in the region, especially in Gulf States, and that Arabic is the "fastest-growing language on the Internet," writes Keach Hagey on The National's Beep Beep blog.

However, Hagey remarks that the "potential is very uneven," citing disparities in broadband availability and the fact that high quality, intellectually stimulating content is not really available for the Middle East.

Outreach to Muslim Communities Unveiled

In a reflection on President Barack Obama's statement that "Islam is not the problem," Mark Lynch writes for Foreign Policy that the central focus of the Obama administration's outreach to Muslims involves grassroots engagement, initiatives for the common good, a defense of freedom of religion and expression, and addressing local needs instead of an emphasis on curtailing violent extremism.

Lynch refers to an article that Andrew Higgins wrote for The Washington Post, which found that overt American efforts to promote "liberal Islam" routinely backfire. He notes that the Obama administration's "more nuanced and disaggregated approach defined by...mutual interests and mutual respect" will reap greater dividends than the Bush-era's extensive intrusion into religious matters during its attempt to combat "Islamofascism."

"Deflating the extremists through indirect action and a reorientation to common interests... instead of building up Al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements with an exaggerated focus against 'violent extremism,'" writes Lynch, will switch the conversation "to other things which ordinary Muslims and Arabs care for."

Despite these tactics, the US will not support the effort by the Organization of the Islamic Conference to ban religious defamation at the United Nations, fearing a conflict between religious protection and freedom of speech and worship, reports The Washington Times.

"We are convinced that the best antidote to intolerance is not the defamation of religions' approach of banning and punishing offensive speech, but rather a combination of robust legal protections against discrimination and hate crimes, proactive government outreach to minority religious groups and the vigorous defense of both freedom of religion and expression," said Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton while unveiling the State Department's annual report on international religious freedom.

The Department of State's Special Representative to Muslim Communities, Farah Pandith, told the Council on Foreign Relations that US-Muslim engagement programs include work in local communities but are not engaging a "particular kind of religious leader or type of Islam." The programs focus on strengthening social networking, technology initiatives and positively emphasizing Muslim identity in the arts and culture areas.

Efforts to engage with Muslim communities hinge on being able to communicate with "people who have influence whether they're religious leaders, scholars, academics, teachers, businesspeople," said Pandith, who also stressed the role of Muslim youth. Each region has "different nuances" which require different policies "based upon the needs on the ground and...the issues," she continued.

"It is very clear that the only voices that can push back against that ideology are Muslims themselves."

Farah A. Pandith, US Special Representative to Muslim Communities.

This policy outreach occurs throughout other Western nations as well. Pandith notes that European Muslims are working to build a "balance between being Muslim and Western, not Muslim or Western, and to talk about the fact that Islam and democracy are compatible and to talk about the fact that you can be both modern and Muslim."

Television is being harnessed as a medium for promoting tolerance and understanding in the United States, reports Tim Goodman for the San Francisco Chronicle. "Who Speaks for Islam?" a series on LinkTV, will

focus on the portrayal of Muslims on television programs such as 24 and Little Mosque on the Prairie. The television series attempts to “change rampant stereotypes from the inside” and develop more nuanced depictions of Muslims.

According to Pandith, the vast majority of Muslim communities do not support Islamic radicalism. She believes that soft-power engagement is a necessary tactic to undermine radical narratives and foment shifts in attitudes within problematic regions.

“It is very clear that the only voices that can push back against that ideology are Muslims themselves,” she concluded.

Arabic Domain Names Offer New Access

The regulatory body overseeing the internet has approved the use of domain names written in non-Latin characters, reports Al-Jazeera. This change is viewed as the biggest change in the forty year history of the internet.

Wael Ghanim, Google’s product and marketing manager for the Middle East and Africa, told Al-Jazeera there is increased interest in Arabic domain names. “The Arabic domain is actually a great initiative... as it solves a clear problem of transliteration [since] there are a lot of different ways where you can write an Arabic name into English.” It is estimated that there are approximately 40 million Arab internet users, and the number is rising rapidly.

However, not everyone is happy with the changes. “If Korean is used [for] international communication, foreigners will not be able to understand and will not be able to read it well enough, so there could be some problems in communication,” internet user Chang Yong-Wong told Al-Jazeera.

Technical advances have been used to allow portions of internet addresses to use a few non-Latin characters, but until now, they were limited to only 37 characters. For example, internet users with little or no knowledge of English had to type in Latin characters to

access websites in Chinese or Arabic.

Regional manager for the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) Baher Esmat believed that website addresses entirely in Arabic won’t be the only factor responsible for bringing more people in the Arab world online, reports ITP.

According to the latest figures by Internet World Stats, there are nearly 48 million internet users in the Middle East, representing slightly less than 3% of the world’s online population. “Think about the millions of people in the Arab world who are yet to come online,” Esmat mused. He added that Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs) won’t solve all of the internet access problems in the region.

He stated, “As access becomes more affordable in the Arab world, and with more Arabic content made available online, [domain names] will be complementary to such developments to help the majority of the Arab population have easier means to use the Internet.”

Media Development in the Middle East Leads to Film Festival

Qatar hosted the first Doha Tribeca Film Festival (DTFF) between October 29 and November 1, in an effort “to spur the economic and cultural revitalization of Lower Manhattan” in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks, reports The National.

The Tribeca Film Festival, which actors Robert de Niro, Jane Rosenthal, and Craig Hatkoff created in 2002, had its first outpost in the Gulf nation. The festival buys its own movie theaters and funds its own films. In the seven years since it was established, the festival has become one of the most prestigious film festivals in the US.

Her Excellency Sheika Mayassa bint Hamad Al-Thani, the president of Qatar’s museum authority, originally worked as an intern for the New York Tribeca Film Festival. After completing her internship, Al-Thani suggested Doha

as a second location for the festival.

Amanda Palmer, a television broadcaster for Al-Jazeera English, was appointed artistic director for the DTFF. She stated, “We had to be very clear that we are a film festival in Doha, in the Middle East.” In concurrence, Al-Thani asserted, “Our vision is to create a festival that genuinely engages the Qatari people.”

“It is imperative for the region’s TV content industry to come together ... ensuring the stability and viable future for the industry as a whole.”

Neil Manwaring, Middle East Television (METV) organizer.

The Doha Tribeca Film Festival displayed local talent, including the Middle East International Film Festival’s Audience Awardwinner, No One Knows About Persian Cats, and Team Qatar, a documentary about Qatar’s international debate team. The festival also included classical Arab films such as Al-Momia and the Palestinian film Pomegranates and Myrrh.

Business Intelligence reports that Turner Classic Movies (TCM) was also a media partner at the DTFF. According to the news site, TCM “reaffirms its commitment to supporting local talent and filmmaking in the region.”

Alan Musa, Vice President and General Manager of Turner Broadcasting Systems, declared, “There is a significant amount of undiscovered talent in the Arab world and it is festivals like this that will help identify this aptitude.”

The DTFF and TCM’s support of filmmaking in the Middle East is indicative of a larger trend throughout

the region. According to PR-Inside, the broadcast industry is growing rapidly in the Middle East, and the article forecasts that media will expand in the region at double-digit rates over the next five years.

Middle East Television's (METV) organizer, Neil Manwaring, discussed the expansion of the global broadcast sector. He noted that the demand for Arabic content in the region is also growing, especially in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. More households in the region are earning wages at medium and high income levels, which may lead to an increase in television purchases.

The growth in the broadcast industry is not limited to news shows, either. Manwaring commented, "Entertainment and religious broadcasting has shown significant growth."

Summing up the importance of media working together in the region, Manwaring concluded, "It is imperative for the region's TV content industry to come together at METV and collectively build a road map, ensuring the stability and viable future for the industry as a whole."

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