

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Improving US Public Diplomacy

Noting that the US ability to communicate its objectives to countries around the world is supported by public diplomacy efforts, the think tank Center for American Progress (CAP) argues that the State Department must have a clearer plan for meeting the US government's overall strategic communications objectives.

Likewise, the new Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review launched by the State department will outline the strategies and tools that US diplomats should use to meet the goals of the President's national security strategy. In order to do so, however, the State Department must undergo a major overhaul as an agency to ensure better coordination between public diplomacy activities and a common set of objectives.

The CAP remarks, "The Department has thus far not followed this recommendation," put forth initially by the Government Accountability Office." CAP suggests that the Obama administration should make "this agency-wide strategy its top public diplomacy priority," while crafting "region-specific comprehensive strategies, which draw from the State Department's overall objectives."

Not only would this step ensure a better recognition of the multiple challenges at hand varying in function of the region involved, but it would facilitate working with immigrant communities which may shape opinion in their home countries.

Geoffrey Cowan at the University of Southern California Public Diplomacy Center concurs that a nation's public diplomacy priority should be to communicate a nation's values to the people of the world—qualities and beliefs that transcend any particular leader or administration.

He adds that better coordination is essential and requires a very long view of the country's interests and "in that sense must be larger and more enduring than the popularity or unpopularity of any individual leader."

The Obama administration came into office promising to increase the country's commitment to public diplomacy and Obama's personal popularity is largely credited with improving America's image abroad.

But while the administration has also initiated some important measures that may have long-term benefits, including specific programs aimed at scientists and women, much remains unfinished. Cowan remarks, "Hopefully in the second year [the Obama administration] will find new ways to put fresh leadership and vitality into the other tools of public diplomacy."

White House Announcements to More Key Posts Create Further Controversy

President Obama recently nominated a new bipartisan slate for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an independent federal agency in charge of all US civilian international news broadcasting, reports Free Media Online. If confirmed by the US Senate, the eight new appointees would completely replace the current BBG Board, with the exception of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who serves as an ex-officio member.

Free media Online points out that the BBG has been rated in employee surveys by the US Office of Personnel Management "as one of the worst managed

[entities] within the federal government," with Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra Television being the two most flagrant examples.

The news site adds that in order to pay the private media contractors favored by the Bush Administration to get Sawa and Al-Hurra running, the BBG eliminated all Voice of America Arabic news programs and cut broadcasts to many other countries without free media.

Dana Perino, a former top aide of former president George W. Bush, was among the recent nominees to the new slate on the board. Her nomination is already generating controversy, according to Straits Time.

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Perino currently serves as Chief Issues Counselor for the United States at the international public relations firm Burson-Marsteller, and as a contributor to Fox News Channel, which has sparred with the Obama administration over the past few months. Perino, who describes herself as “always a Bushie,” was Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s choice for one of the Republican seats on the bipartisan board.

Another nominee, Michael Meehan, is also generating controversy as he was previously nominated by President Bush to the Board, reports Matt Armstrong on his blog Mountain Runner. Meehan has a previous connection to the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, as he is a business partner of the husband of Kitty DiMartino, Judith McHale’s Chief of Staff. Al Kamen points out in The Washington Post that in fact, Meehan’s confirmation was stalled in the Senate, along other several nominees.

In other announcements for key administration posts, President Obama nominated Douglas B. Wilson for Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs at the Department of Defense, reports the International Security Research and Intelligence Agency, ISRIA.

Wilson served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. He spent a year as National Political Director of the Democratic Leadership Council before returning to the Pentagon in the summer of 2000 to become Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. Mr. Wilson has also served as Director of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs for the US Information Agency.

As the Pentagon’s chief spokesman, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs must balance the competing demands of freedom of information and national security, explains the National Academy of Public Administration. The job requires a seasoned news media or public relations professional with experience dealing with diverse audiences.

The war on terror added a new level of urgency to the role and tested the line between public affairs and propaganda.

Obama’s Support Waning

Almost immediately after President Obama assumed office, his detractors were eager to declare his “honeymoon” with the American public to be over. But now, as his first year in office draws to a close, commentators across the ideological spectrum have noticed increasing disillusionment even from once-staunch Obama supporters. Some cite his sluggish attention to the war in Afghanistan, while others claim his repeated deference to foreign leaders has undermined his legitimacy.

“Outsized expectations,” nearly impenetrable dilemmas, and a persistent conservative party may be contributing factors to President Barack Obama’s slipping approval ratings, writes George Packer for The New Yorker. Packer adds that Obama has not been successful at communicating and explaining his policies and intentions to the public— a peculiar pattern for a White House now famous for strict message control and inspiring speeches.

“President Obama seems, very strangely, to have forgotten that his most important constituency is not his small circle of advisers but his three hundred million countrymen,” he writes.

“No one loves Barack Obama,” claims Peggy Noonan at The Wall Street Journal. “There were Bill Clinton supporters who really loved him. George W. Bush had people who loved him. A lot of people loved Jack Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. But no one seems to love Mr. Obama now,” she continues.

Other analysts stress that Obama is faced with almost insurmountable issues, which preceded his administration. The war in Afghanistan, the financial crisis, and the detainees at Guantanamo Bay are all inherited from his predecessor, comments Amir Taheri at Asharq-Alawsat.

“Buyer’s remorse with regards to Obama... is not related to what he has really done but to what people expected of him and he failed to do,” says Taheri.

“The problem, however, is that neither those who voted for him ... nor those

who admired him on other shores, have been prepared to lift a finger on the few occasions that he has tried to do anything,” Taheri continues. So-called supporters at home and abroad are quick to throw lavish ceremonies, grant awards, and extol Obama’s virtues, but when it comes to concrete actions, no one has delivered yet.

“The same is true of Israel and its Arab adversaries,” Taheri claims. “My guess is that [both sides] will just try to sit Obama out, hoping he would be a one-term president.”

“President Obama seems to have forgotten that his most important constituency is not his small circle of advisers but his three hundred million countrymen.”

George Packer, The New Yorker

Opposing Views says that depending on how Obama’s accomplishments (or lack thereof) are analyzed, both detractors and supporters can find plenty of justification for their opinions.

“The question, a year since we elected him, isn’t how much Obama has accomplished,” the website quotes Esquire. “The question is why we’ve turned so small and mean that we only see half of it— the half we happen to agree with.”

Al-Hurra Thriving?

Brian Conniff, president of the Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN), the non-profit that controls Hurra and

Sawa, recently reiterated his belief in the potential of the Al-Hurra satellite station, reports Trading Markets. The Arabic language satellite TV station beams into 22 countries in the Middle East from its headquarters in Springfield, Virginia, and claims to cater to all audiences by offering news, talk shows and an array of documentaries.

Conniff explains that the channel has come a long way in the hearts and minds of Arab audiences since its inception. "There was a lot of bias against the launch, but in five years I think we have gone a long way to overcoming that, by just demonstrating we had a good, solid product. Our audience has steadily grown and we are starting to hit our stride," he says.

He adds that being funded by the US does not mean the channel is subject to the whims of the government. Conniff further argues that USG funding does not necessarily entail bias in favor of America, and he recommends that viewers watch the channel and draw their own conclusions, instead of blindly following critics.

"Our audience has steadily grown and we are starting to hit our stride."

Brian Conniff, Middle East Broadcasting Network president.

Conniff cites Al-Hurra's recently launched "Al-Youm" as one example of the quality of programming the BBG channel currently offers. "Al-Youm" is a three hour primetime show broadcast simultaneously from Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, Jerusalem and Virginia. According to Al-Bawaba, the show tackles regional and international news, and economic, cultural and social issues, and blends them seamlessly into entertainment, sports, technology and human interest stories.

Conniff labeled "Al-Youm" as "a natural extension of the growing sophistication of the Arab media market." Viewers of "Al-Youm" seem to genuinely support

the show, and praise its unique and original approach to news programming. Conniff asserts that "Al-Youm" has considerably lifted the public standing of Al-Hurra in a short time.

One of the anchors of the show, Engy Anwar, is making news herself for being the first woman to report live from Mecca during the Hajj, according to the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

"The Hajj is an essential part of any Muslim's life and of keen interest for our audience. In addition to reporting on the events each day, "Al-Youm's" coverage will focus on the personal stories of the people participating in the Hajj," stated "Al-Youm" Executive Producer Fran Mires.

Recent surveys of the Middle East by research companies such as ACNielsen show that Al-Hurra has an estimated weekly reach of 27.7 million viewers. Al-Hurra is broadcast on the Nilesat and Arabsat satellites in the Middle East and the Hotbird satellite system in Europe.

Saddam Makes a Comeback on TV!

On the first day of Eid Al-Adha, an important holiday of the Islamic calendar and the anniversary of Saddam's hanging three years ago, a new channel called Al-Arabi (the Arab) began broadcasting on satellite television across the Arab world, reports The Associated Press. The station's official name alternates between Al-Lafeta (the banner) and Al-Arabi.

This mysterious satellite channel, dubbed "Saddam's channel," broadcasts the life story and speeches of Iraq's contentious former leader, Saddam Hussein. Most of the programming consists of montages of flattering, still images of Saddam -- some of him dressed in military uniform, others in a suit, even one astride a white horse. One prominently displayed image is that of a man burning an American flag. Another shows graves covered with Iraqi flags.

All the pictures are set against audio recordings of Saddam making speeches and reciting poetry. Patriotic songs urge listeners to "liberate our country," according to The Associated Press.

Amid allegations of receiving funding by former Ba'ath Party members, no one seems to know who is bankrolling Al-Arabi, although The Associated Press found one man in Damascus, Syria named Mohammed Jarboua, who claims to be the channel's chairman. Jarboua declared he is simply a reminiscing supporter of Saddam, saying the channel "didn't receive a penny from the Ba'athists" and is intended for Iraqis and other Arabs who "long for [Saddam's] rule."

Jarboua refused to say who is funding Al-Arabi besides "people who love us."

BBC Arabic reports that allegations have also been made that Al-Arabi could be funded by family members of the former Iraqi president who now live abroad. Reactions among Iraqis were mixed; some felt the channel may fuel further tensions, while others expressed nostalgia.

"Iraqis don't need such a satellite channel because it has hostile intentions," said Hassan Subhi, a 28-year-old Shi'ite who owns an Internet cafe in eastern Baghdad.

According to a report by Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabi was to be named Saddam Hussein originally, but its name was changed due to political pressure, remarks Iranian Press TV. So far, the Iraqi government has declined to comment.

Yet a media adviser for the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, declared the channel is "an attempt from the dissolved Ba'ath Party to return to Iraq's politics."

Jarboua revealed to The Associated Press that Al-Arabi started nine months ago in Lebanon. Ziad Khassawneh, a Jordanian Ba'athist who once headed Saddam's defense team, said wealthy Iraqis living in Lebanon, Syria and other Arab countries are funding the channel.

One Jordan-based Iraqi Ba'athist said the station broadcasts from Libya and is run by followers of Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, a close advisor to Saddam and a top leader of the outlawed Ba'ath party. Douri's whereabouts is unknown.

A Middle East satellite expert who desired to remain anonymous said Al-Lafeta's operators tried to hide any clues to their identities and broadcast sites by using a variety of satellite services and frequencies. The channel airs via

Noorsat, a Bahrain-based satellite service. It also has purchased a frequency on Egypt-owned NileSat, which is run by Eutelsat, a European consortium.

However, the mysterious TV channel praising Saddam Hussein dropped off the airwaves on Monday, just three days after it began broadcasting, reports The Associated Press. Although the director of the channel blamed it on technical issues, the website of a political coalition led by Maliki jeered at what it predicted “was the end of the TV channel.”

“This Ba’athist channel said goodbye after ... days of its starting,” said the statement on the website of the State of Law Coalition, led by Maliki, a Shiite. “We salute our national government if it participated to close this Ba’athist channel.”

The channel dredged up the sectarian divisions that Saddam inspired among Shiites and Sunnis at a time when Iraq is gearing up for crucial national elections. Iraqi politicians have been arguing over parliamentary seat distribution in a dispute that has inflamed the splits and will likely delay the vote beyond its constitutionally required January 30 deadline.

Sticky Times for the Media in Iraq

Nearly one month after the Nilesat and Arabsat satellite operators took the Iranian channel Al-Alam off air, the wave of regional and international condemnation continues, reports Al-Alam.

Many analysts assert the decision by Arabsat and Nilesat, based in Saudi Arabia and Cairo respectively, was a strategic move against Al-Alam, which broadcasts in Arabic but is owned and operated by the Iranian government. Iranian officials have also denounced the decision as an “illegal” act which they could file suit against.

In an exclusive interview with Al-Alam television, Sokneh Falak, a member of Basra provincial council, slammed the decision by the satellite providers. “We condemn Arabsat and Nilesat over dropping Al-Alam, a network stating right and reality,” she said.

Jafar Mohammad Baqer, another member of the council, added that there was too much pressure on the two satellite companies from the Saudi government and some Persian Gulf states to drop Al-Alam.

Other media outlets are also feeling the wrath of censorship in Iraq, reports Asharq-Alawsat, raising fears of a crackdown on Iraq’s often partisan media ahead of national elections early next year. Lawsuits have been filed or threatened against both foreign and local media outlets critical of Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki’s government.

Asharq-Alawsat points to a recent incident where the British newspaper The Guardian was ordered by an Iraqi court to pay 100 million Iraqi dinars (USD 86,000) in compensation for an article “in which unnamed Iraqi intelligence officials accused Maliki of being increasingly authoritarian.”

“A free media in Iraq represents a real threat to all [the political] parties.”

Ziad Al-Ajili, head of the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory.

At the same time, the Iraqi Department for Communications and Media has issued rules allowing it to shut down any media company that encourages “terrorism, violence and tensions,” and requiring individual broadcasters to obtain licenses. The Iraqi government is also moving to censor some books, and seeking powers to block websites deemed to be pornographic or inciting violence.

The tightening restrictions are reminiscent of the methods employed by former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to muzzle the media. But Burhan Al-Shawi, general director of the Department for Communications and Media in Iraq, claims the measures are

common around the world and are meant to bring some order to the industry.

Ziad Al-Ajili, the head of the Iraqi press freedom group the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory argues, “A free media in Iraq represents a real threat to all [the political] parties.” Most news outlets in Iraq are funded by political factions “with an axe to grind, rivals to flay and careers to promote,” he continues. “Few are impartial.”

Al-Jazeera English Sets up Shop in Canada

Al-Jazeera English (AJE) will soon be available on cable and satellite providers throughout Canada, reports The Canadian Press. AJE is the sister network to the leading Arabic news channel Al-Jazeera. The network, which is based in Qatar, leveraged its popularity in the Middle East by launching an English language news channel to compete with BBC and CNN.

AJE is currently broadcasting in 100 countries via satellite and cable television and is also available online. The channel is present throughout Europe, and is one of the most watched news channels on YouTube, according to Walied Khogali and Anita Krajnc for Rabble.

In order to be shown on Canadian television, AJE had to pass a rigorous application process with the Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), which included a period of public comment. Canadian citizens sent approximately 2,600 letters and e-mails in support of AJE’s application, while only 40 letters expressed opposition to the news channel.

An overwhelming percentage of the support came from the group Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), according to Exchange Magazine. Among the letters of support for AJE’s petition, over 83% of the respondents were CJPME supporters.

“We are also pleased with the role that CJPME was able to play in terms of encouraging this approval: we helped

introduce [AJE Director] Tony Burman to Canadians through two public events, and we also encouraged many of our adherents to submit official letters of support to the CRTC,” stated CJPME President Tom Woodley.

Canadian politicians, including New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton and Conservative Senator Hugh Segal, were among AJE’s supporters. The Canadian Jewish Congress and B’nai Brith Canada did not officially oppose the news channel’s petition, but expressed that they would remain vigilant to the content aired on AJE.

“There is clearly a demand for the diversity and quality of journalism Al-Jazeera represents.”

Steve Anderson, OpenMedia.ca

The CRTC’s approval is a victory for the news network, as the commission clamped down on the Arabic language network Al-Jazeera five years ago. In 2004, they approved Al-Jazeera for broadcast in Canada, but only under strict restrictions. AJE’s application also prompted some allegations of bias in the news channel’s reporting, which the CRTC deemed to be “insufficient.” In its final approval, the commission did not dictate surveillance of AJE’s content.

Khogali and Krajnc at Rabble believe that excessive media attention was directed to the allegations of unbalanced reporting. “The tremendously positive ‘Al-Jazeera effect’ on liberalizing media in the Middle East and in North America has been almost entirely neglected in these reports,” they claim.

The commission explained its authorization as “promoting a diversity of editorial points of view.”

AJE supporters called for the CRTC’s endorsement in the name of diversity as well. “There is clearly a demand for the diversity and quality of journalism Al-Jazeera represents,” asserted Steve Anderson, director of OpenMedia.ca.

The CJPME “believes that AJE will bring much-needed variety and perspective to the Canadian news market, as AJE is known to provide far more extensive coverage from the Developing World than other international news stations,” reports Exchange Magazine.

Some commissioners expressed concern over AJE’s unconditional approval, noting that its sister network remains under heavy restrictions. According to The Canadian Press, Marc Patrone protested that the commission should have taken into account the record of Al-Jazeera’s Arabic language channel.

“It’s also a missed opportunity to send a message internationally about levels of journalistic standards and codes that we consider important enough to demand from all news broadcasters who wish to operate in this country,” argued Patrone. “Adding diversity is necessary, but not at any price,” he added.

CIA Seeks to recruit Arab-Americans Through TV

A TV commercial depicting Arab-American family life is the latest tactic by the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) to appeal to Arab-Americans, reports The National. In a move to recruit Arab-American and Iranian-American employees, the intelligence agency recently produced two television commercials aimed at the ethnic groups.

At The National, Steven Stanek comments that although the CIA does not release statistics of the ethnicity of its agents, its lack of Arab and Farsi speakers is evident. “Only about a third of analysts and 40 per cent of overseas operatives are proficient in a foreign language,” he notes.

Affirming Stanek’s postulation, the agency created a five-year plan to boost fluency in Arabic and other languages, reports NewsMax. “We are actively looking for people who are from first and second-generation American communities, people who know the cultures that we need to operate in, know the language,” said CIA Spokeswoman Marie Harf.

The commercial has not aired on television, but the CIA recently held a private screening for its target audience. The screening took place in Dearborn, Michigan, which boasts a large Middle Eastern population, including over 30,000 Arab-Americans. Approximately 40 people attended the viewing.

The advertisement aimed at Arab-Americans portrays family life. NewsMax describes the commercial as showing guests sitting around a dining room decorated with Middle Eastern wall-hangings. “It’s an inviting, if idealized, dinner party scene from any Arab-American home,” observes the news site, while Stanek at The National remarks, “It has all the trappings of the modern-day iftar.”

“It’s important for them to know we understand how important their culture is to them.”

Christina Petrosian, CIA.

At the end of the 30-second spot, a narrator with an Arabic accent says, “Your nation, your world.” The shot zooms out to an image of the United States from space as the narrator asserts, “They’re worth protecting.”

Results from focus groups and comments from CIA employees of Middle Eastern heritage informed the content of the ad, claims NewsMax. The commercial attempted to portray Arab-Americans as citizens who “want to retain their ties to their homelands but embrace a sense of duty to the US.”

Christina Petrosian, chief of advertising and marketing for the CIA's recruitment and retention center, spoke of the deliberate use of Middle Eastern images in the commercial. "It's important for them to know we understand how important their culture is to them. They're not going to lose that once they walk through the front doors of the CIA to work," she stated.

She described the Middle Eastern-style wall hangings and dinner settings as "connectors to the Arab world."

The CIA's culturally-based approach speaks to a skeptical Arab-American population. Many of the country's Arabs and Muslims are suspicious of the US government's intelligence agencies. They believe that spying is going on in mosques, among other activities detrimental to the Arab community, according to NewsMax.

Khalil Al-Hajal, community editor at the Dearborn-based Arab American News newspaper, spoke of the community's skepticism. "There definitely is an image problem," he commented. "For many people, just because of the record of torture and extraordinary rendition, the CIA will never be able to get in with them."

Al-Hajal is familiar with the CIA's recruitment strategy, as the agency has been recruiting in Dearborn since 2002. Despite acknowledging the community's suspicion, Al-Hajal did not directly express disapproval with the CIA's latest tactic. "They're making an effort, and it's clear," he admitted.

Although the private screening drew applause, some Arab-Americans expressed confusion over the commercial's message. "I just saw family sharing a meal, doing what we do best -- the hugs and kisses over great food and great company -- but I didn't see why it's important to the CIA," said Suehaila Amen, a community activist in Dearborn.

However, Petrosian believes that the commercial will resonate with the Arab-American audience. "Showing the commercial in this way -- with a Middle Eastern focus -- hopefully that will generate that interest," she asserted.

90 minutes Gone Wrong between Egypt and Algeria

Clashes in Egypt and Algeria following recent soccer matches between the two countries have highlighted existing tensions in inter-Arab relations, says Abdel Moneim Said at Al-Ahram. To some extent, the Egyptian-Algerian crisis reflects the notion that soccer is a civilian extension of international conflicts.

Said explains, "The fact is that the sports media contributed to 'militarizing' the recent match. Take, for example, the belligerent language of some headlines: 'Declaration of war on Egypt', 'Algiers and the massacre of Cairo', and 'When Tel Aviv is more merciful than Cairo.'"

"The fact is that the sports media contributed to 'militarizing' the recent match."

Abdel Moneim Said, Al-Ahram.

Hussein Shobokshi from Asharq-Alawsat argues that Egypt dealt with the hostilities between both countries with "unjustifiable emotional incitement," granting greater importance than it deserved, while Algeria was no better and replicated a "pattern of violence."

"These events confirm a typical pattern of violence, especially in light of the violent events experienced by [Algeria] on account of the fighting between the extremist groups in the country and the ruling regime," he continues.

As for the public, Shobokshi deplores that it reached its conclusions on the basis of what was broadcast without questioning any of the 'facts,' demonstrating that interaction among Arab states is

"fraught with cracks and flawed slogans."

Shobokshi also points out that this latest debacle between Egypt and Algeria illustrates that old grudges are perpetuated as long as they are only addressed in "a simplistic manner;" a method that does not seem to be changing and will continue to encourage tension.

Diana Mukkaled for Asharq-Alawsat notes that the Arabs -- both political regimes societies -- have a long history of exchanging accusations and inciting fanaticism through words and actions.

Although Mukkaled also blames the media for fueling further tensions between both countries, she explains that the erosion of freedom of expression in the Arab world, not to mention an increase in marginalization and poverty, are the true culprits.

"The media was unleashed to play its game, inciting feelings over a sporting event, rather than politics," argues Mukkaled. "The strict control that ruling regimes have over the media and the press has always been enough to rapidly contain such excesses without actually treating their underlying cause."

The latest crisis allowed bottled-up anger to surface against the backdrop of a football match; however the slogans being raised were political, and their end result was hatred and mutual rejection. "It seems that investing patriotic sentiments in sport has become the job of the ruling regimes in order to heal internal rifts," she concludes, "and this is something that both the media and [those] with pent-up anger got caught up in."

Obama Comes to a Dead End over Palestinian Issues

The Palestinian Authority's recent request to the United Nations for a resolution to create a Palestinian state has prompted skeptical reactions from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, reports Gulf News. Staunch supporters of each perspective accuse the other of being disingenuous and deceitful,

while some analysts say that President Obama may still have the political capital to achieve a lasting peace agreement.

While Obama's speech in Cairo sent a clear and unambiguous message to Israel, the president has failed to follow up on his adamant initial requests, accuses the Gulf News editorial.

"[Obama] clearly sees it as in Israel's long-term security interest and the US national interest to reach a fair settlement on the Palestinian conflict," the article surmises. "[But] Israelis have a record of turning against leaders who place the vital US alliance in jeopardy."

However, Raghida Dergham at Dar Al-Hayat believes that now is not the time for Palestinians to confront the Obama Administration. She writes that if the Palestinians push too hard now, they may force Obama and other potential supporters to back Israel at Palestine's expense.

"It is important for [Palestinians] to remember that international legitimacy is by their side."

Raghida Dergaham, Dar Al-Hayat.

"It is important for [Palestinians] to remember that international legitimacy is by their side," Dergham says. She advises against underestimating Obama or dismissing his "patient and obedient" style. "His political record is filled with those who mistakenly believed him to be the weak side of the equation," she remarks.

The conflict still remains highly personal and emotionally charged for both sides, and many commentators continue to underscore the opposition's negative qualities.

"Inspired by a combination of Islamic,

Nazi, and Communist tactics, many Arabs also employ the 'big lie technique' against Israel, the Jewish people, and the US," claims Richard Shulman at the Examiner. He cites the Internet, Western journalism, and the academic world as culprits in propagating "the big lie."

Conversely, Bouthaina Shaaban at Asharq-Alawsat calls Israeli officials "criminals" and asserts that the Israelis are lying about Israel's laws regarding Arabs, justification of settlements, and Israel's stated intentions in the region. Shaaban also accuses the Arab media of being too soft and Arab leaders of being too lenient towards Israel.

"The time has not yet come for a [Palestinian] confrontation with the US administration...and this is what those who call for inciting outbidding, confrontation and media boasting should be wary of, concludes Dergham at Dar Al-Hayat."

Better Internet Growth for Greater Freedom in the Middle East

A recent Middle East Broadband market survey shows that internet penetration remains low across the region, reports Live PR. The survey also concluded that in comparison to other regions, access speeds are often relatively slow and tariffs are relatively high.

However, the Middle East is making a strong push towards higher broadband penetration. The survey suggests that Arab youth will drive expansion as it grows up with internet accessibility and its use will become the norm. In addition, liberalization and increased competition are bound to produce a greater variety of services and mediums.

While broadband growth has taken off in the small, oil-rich and developed Gulf countries, wide income gaps across the Middle East are echoed by disparities in Internet and broadband penetration rates.

Internet access levels overall are generally low, remarks Report Linker,

an IT publication. Qatar, Bahrain and UAE all have high household broadband penetration, particularly among citizens. While on the other hand, the largest country in the region, Saudi Arabia, has a much lower broadband penetration, although it is rising quickly.

One reason cited for such slow Internet and broadband growth in Arab countries is a lack of sufficient and compelling content in Arabic. Internet use also requires active effort from users, rather than the passive engagement of newspapers. The youth across the Arab world realize the internet offers new opportunities for political expression and communication, says Nawaat. Across the region, "legions of bloggers" and online activists are testing the limits of free speech in the Middle East, and ordinary people are speaking their minds in chat rooms, forums and online newspaper sites.

However, the impact of the internet remains limited. "While the media scene has changed and once forbidden views are accessible, the greater amount of information has not yet translated into the political process because the formal political institutions have not changed," observes Rami G. Khouri, editor-at-large of Beirut's Daily Star.

Indeed, less than a quarter of the Arab world's population (23.7%) uses the Internet, according to Internet World Stats, a market research company that compiles online data. Some Arab countries have lower rates of usage, such as Egypt with 15.4% and others are higher, such as Qatar with 52%, compared to 74% of the population in the US and 73% in Israel.

Just as rapidly as Internet use is spreading, governments are scrambling to control it. According to OpenNet Initiative, the Middle East "is one of most heavily censored regions in world," with Internet censorship "on the rise" as governments increase "the scope and depth" of their filtering and blocking.

Report Linker adds that too much emphasis has also been put on hardware and the latest "must-have gizmo," setting aside the importance of creativity to boost the region's digital content programs. However this is beginning to change thanks to the flourishing satellite TV sector providing a broader variety of content.

“At least 60-70% of homes across the Middle East have access to multi-channel TV, much of it Free-to-Air DTH satellite. Around 70% of the 400+ channels are privately owned,” remarks the news site.

The new role played by digital satellite TV content is bringing forth new resolution to create viable content and funding for the talent that is available in the region, according to AME Info. CEO of Pyramedia, Nashwa Al-Ruwaini, discussed how companies had to operate outside the region in the broader context of improving content of programming in the Arab world.

However, with a burgeoning industry now in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, content creators are increasingly looking and encouraging talents and helping them get the required funding to succeed. Nashwa stated, “Instead of taking Western formats and Arabizing them, we should tailor-make our own formats for the region that appeal to everyone and create content and concepts that are distinctly Arabic.”

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