

# The Layalina Review

## On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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### Engagement Prevails for the Nobel Peace Prize Winner

Awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to US president Barack Obama demonstrates that there is a global “hunger” for diplomacy, remarks David Plouffe, Obama’s chief campaign manager, according to The Canadian Press. Obama is the first sitting US president in ninety years and the third ever to win the much-respected prize.

Yet, expectations come with the Nobel Prize. “His presidency offers the promise of [diplomacy], but [he has] to deliver,” reflected Plouffe. Although Obama’s tenure has revived hopes across the world for a more stable international diplomatic environment, some questionable decisions have raised doubts as to whether he is a “man of peace.” Detractors cite his recent decision to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan as the latest example of the disparity between Obama’s promises and his actions.

However, many do not consider the Nobel Peace Prize incompatible with President Obama’s strategy in Afghanistan. In his acceptance speech in Oslo, the president outlined his philosophy of engagement with hostile regimes and the necessity to resort to sanctions, reports Doyle McManus for The Los Angeles Times.

Obama also tackled the paradox head-on in his Oslo speech. “Evil does exist in the world,” he said. “War is sometimes necessary.” Far from glorifying the war, he focused on it as a “regrettable necessity,” discussing the importance of global diplomacy through his attempts to engage with hostile regimes such as Iran and North Korea.

Obama declared, “No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door.”

Turning engagement and sanctions into practical action will be a test of the “Obama Doctrine’s” effectiveness.

Asking for patience, the president maintained that his policy of engagement will eventually bear fruit. However, skepticism persists due to the fact that the engagement approach has so far yielded too few results. “That’s where sanctions come in under the Obama Doctrine,” points out McManus.

In Oslo, Obama also stated, “Yes, there will be engagement; yes, there will be diplomacy; but there must be consequences when these things fail.” However, McManus remains hesitant about the ‘engagement and sanctions’ policy. From a historical perspective, “Neither one has been proved to work yet,” he says.

McManus remarks that in the last two weeks, Obama has added more details to his evolving foreign policy blueprint, stressing the importance of multilateralism from allied countries in engaging with rogue regimes. He also notes that in order to achieve tangible gains as a result of international engagement, the US “needs the help of others to make it work.”

While defending the use of military force under some circumstances, Obama was quick to say that there are limits to its effectiveness, writes Craig Nelson for The National.

Obama made brief reference to the Arab-Israel conflict, which he said had “hardened.” He also indicated that the fear of losing cultural identity in a more globally connected world has led to a particular source of violence; he cites the “perversion” of religion, referring to Islamic militants and extremists.

Scott McLeod from the Los Angeles Times suggested that to many people in the Middle East, Obama’s peace prize must come across as a “cruel hoax.” McLeod believes that in the last three months,

the Obama administration has steadily undone the president’s initial positive outreach “by seriously mishandling one of the Middle East’s central issues: the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.”

He points out that to encourage both Israelis and Palestinians to reach a fair and just agreement acceptable to a majority of both parties, Obama must show leadership and prove to be an honest broker. “Dismissing Palestinian rights is a certain path to further failure,” argues McLeod.

McLeod concludes that the Middle East is expecting more from the recipient of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Sharing his sentiment, demonstrators across

### In this issue:

Engagement Prevails for the Nobel Peace Prize Winner	1
Swiss Minaret Ban a Setback for MidEast Diplomacy	1
Obama’s MidEast Diplomacy Generates Optimism Amidst Doubts	2
Media Access Restricted After Wave of Protests in Iran	2
Propaganda on Arab TV: a Threat to US Security?	3
Egyptian-Algerian Relations Get a Yellow Card	4
Women in the Arab World: Breaking New Ground?	4
Gulf States Summit Aims to Make Headway on Regional Issues	5
Dubai Film Festival Offers Bridge between Cultures	6
Arab Blogging Struggles to Affect Change	6
References	10

the street from the Norwegian Nobel Institute waved a banner that said, "Obama, You Won It, Now Earn It."

## Swiss Minaret Ban a Setback for Middle East Diplomacy

Switzerland recently passed a controversial referendum to ban minarets in the country, provoking uproar, intense debate and even protest, reports the Agence France-Presse. The move is regarded by many as "deeply divisive," says UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, as well as a major setback for American and European public diplomacy in the Arab World.

Sweden, which currently holds the presidency of the European Union, commented that the United Nations "should reconsider its presence in Geneva," according to an Associated Press article published in Final Call.

"Even if this is Switzerland, it sends a very unfortunate signal to large parts of the rest of the world about attitudes and prejudices in Europe," Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt wrote on his blog. He continued to observe that the ban is a "poor act of diplomacy" from the Swiss, whose neutrality on globally divisive issues is renowned.

Analysts and commentators are also pointing to the ban as a serious complication for dialogue with Muslims around the world, even among those who are non-practicing, because the minaret is largely seen as a symbol of Arab and Muslim identity.

"The banning of minarets sends a special message of rejection to the tens of millions of European Muslims," writes Ghassan Rubeiz at Global Arab Network.

"The West invests heavily in public diplomacy to create a culture of exchange and understanding with Arabs and Muslims. Banning minarets in the heart of Europe undermines the strategic Western interests in the Muslim world," Reubeiz finishes.

"Most Muslims accept the minaret as an architectural conduit for the call to prayer, but most do not seek political power, subscribe to the burqa, tolerate forced marriages, or accept genital mutilation of girls," comments Ahmed Rehab at the Huffington Post. "How these three things are 'comparable' with a minaret must be Switzerland's dirty little secret because I cannot figure it out," he continues.

Prominent leaders of other religions have also conveyed heavy disapproval of the ban, reports the Christian Post. A top Lutheran reverend, along with the Swiss Council of Religions (a national body comprised of Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders) all released statements condemning the Swiss ban. Similarly, the Conference of European Rabbis declared the decision to be an "undemocratic" violation of religious freedoms, according to YNet News.

*"Most Muslims accept the minaret as an architectural conduit for the call to prayer, but most do not seek political power, subscribe to the burqa, tolerate forced marriages, or accept genital mutilation of girls"*

*Ahmed Rehab, The Huffington Post*

Many in the Arab press are highlighting the ban as an example of Western hypocrisy, especially because it comes from a country that takes pride in its religious and minority tolerance, says Swiss Info. The article cites the reaction of many Arab media outlets, ranging from boycotting Swiss products to criticizing Swiss Muslims for their alleged failure

"to unite and speak under one banner."

But French president Nicolas Sarkozy attempted to defend the Swiss ban in an opinion piece for Le Monde, reports to the Telegraph. Sarkozy claimed that "instead of irrevocably condemning the Swiss," the world should "try to understand what [the ban] sought to express." Namely, that many Europeans feel their culture and society are at risk due to heavy immigration from the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe.

Sarkozy's commentary fueled an already prevalent debate within France over the issue of its own Muslim population (which is the largest in Europe), and French national identity in general. Many on the political left in France have accused the president of posturing to ignite far-right voters in preparation of the upcoming regionalelections,continuestheTelegraph.

Contrarily, the Swiss government has come out opposed to the ban, which was not as an act of legislation but rather a referendum adopted by voters. In fact, the current government and parliament had cautioned constituents prior to the vote that the referendum would violate the Swiss constitution and "cherished tradition of tolerance," reports the Washington Post. A reversal vote is already being considered by the Swiss left, and multiple legal disputes have been filed questioning the constitutionality of the ban.

Another indication of the polarizing nature of the ban is the action of one Swiss businessman, who has built a makeshift minaret on top of his chimney in protest, reports Agence-France Presse. The man, Guillaume Morand, said the ban is especially "scandalous" because Switzerland "actively encourages Arabs to visit the country and spend their money here," the article continues.

Some have also expressed concern that the ban could trigger anti-Western aggression from extremists, or at least give justification to their messages.

"Provocation...risksinflamingextremism," Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey said, according to Final Call.

She also emphasized that the country will not change its foreign policy in light of the ban, but "continue to maintain close relations with Muslim nations."

## Obama's MidEast Diplomacy Generates Optimism Amidst Doubts

President Obama's first year focused on engaging with the Muslim world through a renewed focus on diplomacy, while highlighting shared values and common interests, comments The Denver Post. During the award ceremony for the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, listeners were heartened to hear the president "lay out the realistic limits of diplomacy and good will," the article continues.

Yet it seems that diplomatic outreach to the Middle East is slowing to a halt as the Obama administration scales back its engagement with the region, remarks The Jerusalem Post. For example, US Middle East Envoy George Mitchell has not been to the region in over a month, and is not expected to return until January 2010.

According to The Jerusalem Post, many in Israel feel that Obama believed Netanyahu's moratorium on settlements would advance the peace process. But when the Palestinian Authority failed to respond positively to the move, the US chose to remain silent. One informed source allegedly told The Jerusalem Post that while the US is frustrated with Israel, it would not back away from its commitment to the region.

Obama's award has also generated recent criticism from the Arab world because many believe he has not achieved enough to justify being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, according to Hussein Shobokshi for Asharq-Alawsat.

With no signs of improvements on the horizon, many are uneasy and suspicious with the Obama administration's approach to diplomacy in the Middle East.

However, part of the solution may come through technological innovation, reports Talking Points Memo. In an effort to ensure that certain key points of the president's announcement on troop increases in Afghanistan and Pakistan are heard and understood

by members of those two countries, the State Department translated the comments into several languages and then dispersed them via compressed video for cell phones and other mobile devices.

"Building on the lessons of 21st century statecraft, we are aiming to continually listen, learn and engage people around the world," the State Department's Katie Dowd wrote. "It is our hope that we can continually leverage new tools and technology to reach and engage people whether they are 10 or 10,000 miles away."

This technological initiative plays into the Obama administration's strategy to win public sentiment abroad through nontraditional channels, continues Talking Points Memo. Each foreign policy initiative is staged in layers; interviews with international media, video messages, a major speech or town hall meeting, and finally direct public outreach to guarantee the message has reached its intended audience.

*"They are being forced to choose between saying nothing, speaking out and being jailed, or fleeing the country."*

*Clothilde Le Coz, Reporters Without Borders*

"We're hopeful that leveraging technology this way will help us achieve the President's goal of increasing America's security and undercutting the appeal of Al-Qaeda and other extremists through global engagement," said State Department official Katie Stanton.

## Media Access Restricted After Wave of Protests in Iran

On December 7, tens of thousands of students across more than a dozen campuses participated in anti-government protests in Iran, reports The Examiner.

Many of the students shouted "death to the dictator!" and burned pictures of Iran's supreme leader. According to USA Today, Iranian opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi supported the demonstrations. "A great nation would not stay silent when some [individuals] confiscate its vote," he declared, referring to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial victory in the 2009 election.

Throughout the protests, Iranian police arrested several people who were using mobile phones to take pictures and film the demonstrations. Nevertheless, a few photos and videos managed to surface over the internet.

According to Reporters Without Borders, the Iranian government took several precautions to prevent the media from having access to the December demonstrations. The organization claims that several foreign journalists' accreditations were suspended for 72 hours, leaving them unable to cover the event. Internet connections were blocked as well in some areas, while those who maintained access reported problems with email providers.

Six months after the presidential elections, the Iranian government continues to clamp down on the media, preemptively restricting internet access and dictating the content of newspapers and television shows. The media is considered a dangerous source of discord within the Islamic Republic. "At one point, the regime described the news media as a 'means used in an attempt to overthrow the state,'" writes Clothilde Le Coz for PBS Media Shift.

Iranian officials have largely taken control of newspapers and internet service providers, especially after the Revolutionary Guards acquired the

Telecommunication Company of Iran. Regular disruptions of internet access continue to plague Iranians, who have difficulties accessing Facebook and YouTube and are constantly redirected to websites featuring government propaganda.

Over 100 journalists were arrested in the past six months, with approximately a dozen newspapers shut down by Iranian authorities. In a more recent development, the Iranian daily Hayat-e No was closed down due to its reports on the government reaction to the National Student Day protests.

Le Coz notes that the heavy censorship is spreading to bloggers as well. The Revolutionary Guard ordered all website editors to remove “any content which encourages the population to riot or which spreads threats and rumors.” Recently, the Iranian police also created a 12-member unit under the supervision of the prosecutor general which is in charge of acting “against fraud attempts, commercial advertising, and false information.”

For PBS’s Media Shift, Le Coz mourns the journalists’ predicament in Iran. “They are being forced to choose between saying nothing, speaking out and being jailed, or fleeing the country. In truth, that’s no choice at all,” she concludes.

## Propaganda on Arab TV: a Threat to US Security?

By a vote of 395-3, the United States House of Representatives passed a bill which would require “the US President to file an annual report to Congress on anti-American incitement to violence in Middle East media,” according to The Jerusalem Post.

Iranian news outlet PressTV elaborates that aside from raising concerns that “such incitement poses danger to American soldiers and civilians in the region and at home,” the bill also “calls for punitive measures against networks deemed to be fueling terror.” According to Agence France-Presse, networks such as Al-Aqsa, Hamas’ television station which broadcasts

from Gaza, and Hezbollah’s Al-Manar, are specifically mentioned in the bill.

The Jerusalem Post further indicates that not only do networks such as these face the risk of being branded Specially Designated Global Terrorists, any satellite carrier which broadcasts them would also be subject to sanctions under the proposed law.

According to Worldfocus, the Middle East Research Institute recently released a video dispatch about a children’s program called “Tomorrow’s Pioneers.” The program, which is aired by Al-Aqsa TV in the Gaza Strip, uses cartoon characters like a teddy bear and a bumblebee to indoctrinate youth and incite violence against Israel.

Worldfocus further observes that the show, which is directed by Hamas interior minister Fathi Hamad, “has taught young Palestinians about Zionist aggression in Jerusalem and the alleged sins of the West.”

“Tomorrow’s Pioneers,” which bears a marked resemblance to “Sesame Street,” is hosted by the niece of a Hamas spokesman and has characters such as Assoud, who pledges to “eat the Jews,” and Mujahid, who “has come to free Palestine.”

In related news, Ma’an News Agency reports that Fatah’s armed wing has also “called for the boycott of the Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya satellite networks for their failure to cover the detention of Al-Aqsa Brigades spokesman Khaled Al-Jabari, known as Abu Al-Walid.”

The militant group released a statement accusing the two networks “of not speaking the truth over recent incidents.” While praising other local news agencies for their “true reporting from official sources,” the group asserted that “the bias against the Fatah group extended beyond the most recent reporting gap and extended to dozens of their (Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera) reports of members summoned and harassed by Hamas security forces.”

Meanwhile, The Memri Blog reports that a new Christian channel, Al-Tariq, will begin broadcasting via a US satellite in January 2010. The channel, aimed at Christian converts in the Middle East and the US, will “be funded by Egyptian businessmen and Coptic organizations outside Egypt.”

## Egyptian-Algerian Relations Get a Yellow Card

On the surface, Egyptian and Algerian relations appear to be improving after the disastrous incidents surrounding the Egypt-Algeria soccer matches, reports Dina Ezzat at Al-Ahram Weekly.

Throughout the month of November, qualifying soccer matches between Egypt and Algeria have been tarnished with violent incidents as the two Arab countries competed for a spot in the 2010 FIFA World Cup. While the Egyptian team prevailed in Cairo, Algeria was the ultimate victor in Khartoum, Sudan.

Aggressive rhetoric preceded the games, as both Egyptians and Algerians engaged in vicious comments through the media. “For weeks, Egyptian and Algerian fans engaged in cyberwars, taunting each other in online forums, trading doctored team photos, provocative homemade songs, and YouTube videos,” writes Ursula Lindsey for Foreign Policy.

Lindsey recounts an inflammatory comment by Amr Adeeb, anchor of “Al-Qahira Al-Youm (Cairo Today).” The night before the match in Cairo, Adeeb stated, “What annoys me is the way the Algerians talk ... this provocation, this conceit ... Why do the Algerians hate us so much? We supported them during their million-martyr revolution; we sent them teachers to teach them Arabic.”

Algerians also engaged in the taunting, using Egypt’s controversial relationship with Israel to degrade their opponent. Before the games started, Algerian hackers installed an image of the Star of David over the Egyptian flag on the teams’ official website. An Algerian newspaper also referred to Cairo’s stadium as the “Tel Aviv stadium.” According to Gulf News, Algerian and Egyptian youths composed rap songs demonizing their opponents as “villains who must always lose.”

The rivalry was not limited to heated words— injuries among athletes and fans alike were reported throughout the matches, although Algerian and Egyptian sources offered drastically different accounts. Lindsey notes that

the Algerian newspaper Echorouk posted a video claiming that an Algerian rapper's brother was killed in Egypt, however the video was apparently a hoax.

The furor over the matches also extended to the political arena. Alaa Mubarak, son of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, used television talk shows to complain about the behavior of Algerians in Khartoum, denouncing their "terrorist" conduct. Escalation of the tension following the match in Khartoum led Egypt to withdraw its ambassador from Algeria and forced Libya's leader, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, to mediate between the quarreling nations.

*"Yes, it is true that some of our fans attacked your fans in Khartoum. But even so, do you think that this [is] a reason for your media to refer to our people as the nation of the 'one million whores'?" Algerian civil servant.*

Several Egyptians began to blame their own government for exploiting Egypt's soccer defeat for its own political gain, writes Michael Slackman at The New York Times. Among those critics is best-selling Egyptian author Alaa Al-Aswany. He notes that "the leader who uses power and oppresses his citizens and forges their will in elections cannot convince anyone when he speaks about the dignity of the citizens."

Foreign Policy's Ursula Lindsey also attributes the tension to Egyptian and Algerian government officials. She claims that "authorities could

almost certainly have put the lid on this incitement, if they'd wanted to."

Dina Ezzat from Al-Ahram Weekly shares the same sentiment. She attributes the end of the "media war" to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Algerian President Abdel-Aziz Boutaflika exerting their influence over TV channels and newspapers, thus putting a stop to the fiery rhetoric.

It now seems that both countries are moving past the soccer feud. Recently, Hosni Mubarak said, "Algeria is a sister state and I want no problems with [it]." Algerian presidential advisor Mohamed Barrah called upon the "joint will of Egyptians and Algerians" to help improve bilateral relations.

In a similar attempt, the Algerian Oil Minister Chekib Khelil announced that both nations will set up a joint oil company, reports Agence France-Presse. "You could say we are looking forward" to improved ties between the two countries, Khelil added optimistically.

Despite the appearance of reconciliation, people from both countries continue to take indirect shots at each other.

An Egyptian senior state official commented, "We never wanted to get into a confrontation with Algeria ... but we could not have ignored public anger over the incidents that followed the game in Khartoum."

One Algerian civil servant, admitted, "Yes, it is true that some of our fans attacked your fans in Khartoum. But even so, do you think that this [is] a reason for your media to refer to our people as the nation of the 'one million whores?'"

## Women in the Arab World: Breaking New Ground?

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has launched an Arabic version of the "World Survey of the Role of Women in Development" to assess the impact of women's access to resources on the social

and economic development of the Arab world, reports The Daily Star. UN officials believe that the marginalization of women and their susceptibility to violence tends to play a key role in societal development.

The head of the ESCWA Center for Women, Afaf Omer, remarks that even though the economic participation of Arab women has risen steadily, "women in the Arab world cannot help society improve unless they enjoy their full rights." The ESCWA attributes this lack of civil participation to the existence of discriminatory laws, the failure of implementing such legislations, and the lack of awareness of women's rights.

In a similar vein, the Arab Women Organization (AWO) pointed out that women face violence at home, in the community, in institutions, and as a result of armed conflicts. Maghreb reports that the women's rights activist group organized a three-day workshop in Tunis aimed at sharing experiences in the field of fighting violence against Arab women, and formulated a unified Arab strategy to encourage women's participation in the public and political life.

Participants of the AWO workshop issued a statement urging member countries to "issue periodic national reports on the reality of violence against women, and to draft an Arab pilot law in the field of protecting women from violence."

There has been some evidence indicating a change in the position of women in the Arab world. Recently, a Saudi woman was allowed to drive through Saudi customs and immigration after her husband collapsed unexpectedly, despite a ban on women driving in the Kingdom, reports Gulf News. The article also points out that not all women abide by this law; local media occasionally reports on women arrested for violating the driving ban.

One religious television station in Saudi Arabia, Awtan TV, is also breaking new ground by allowing female broadcasters on the air to present television programs as long as they are dressed in the niqab, traditional black attire which covers most of the face, only revealing the woman's eyes. The use of female broadcasters on a religious channel is a significant development in Saudi Arabia, which is one of the most conservative Arab countries.

While some feel wearing the niqab in general is a restraint on women's freedom, the anchor of a breakfast and quiz show at the Saudi station, Ola Al-Barqi, tells BBC that "the face is not the only way to build a relationship." She maintains that her niqab does not prevent her from reporting in the field.

However, Iran's state television takes a different stance on female presenters. According to The Washington Post, women appearing on television programs in Iran are no longer allowed to wear make-up, as the government claims it contradicts sharia, the Islamic law. The state television also considered cutting down on music during programs, and has incited criticism for producing dull programs which avert its viewer to foreign-based Farsi-language satellite channels.

Some Arab women are even entering the world of beauty pageants. On December 26, the West Bank will witness the first ever Miss Palestine 2009 beauty pageant, which includes 58 young participants from the West Bank and other Arab residents in Israel, reports Ria Novosti. The event is organized by Trip Fashion, a private Ramallah-based commercial company, and received support from the Palestinian National Authority as well as international financing.

While the contest aims to show a different, non-political face of the region, Hamas officials claim that the "pageant shows moral degradation in the West Bank," and conflicts with Islamic traditions. But the director of Trip Fashion, Salwa Yousef, disagrees and explains to the Chinese state newspaper Xinhua that "the competition never contradicts with the Palestinian morals or traditions," and "it shows how developed and promoted Palestinian women are."

In similar developments, a number of promising Islamic fashion designers in the Middle East are producing head-turning conservative clothes which give Arab women a modern and stylish look within the framework of the Islamic dress code. Amina Al-Jassim, a Saudi designer, explains to CNN that nowadays, women can wear trendy clothes that "can get the traditions and principles right and still be fashionable."

## Gulf States Summit Aims to Make Headway on Regional Issues

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states are gathering together in Kuwait this week for the 30th GCC Summit to discuss "major regional issues" such as the Middle East peace process, developments in Iraq, Saudi defense of the Saudi-Yemen border with Iran, and the Iranian nuclear program, according to Brunei World. Other key issues at the Summit focus on developing a time schedule for the launch of the GCC Monetary Union, a timeline for the GCC Railway Authority, and steps for a unified Arab power grid.

*"Before each [GCC Summit], many statements are made, promising Gulf citizens of many things, but they soon retreat and go down the drain."*

*Jameel Theyabi, Dar Al-Hayat.*

The president of the United Arab Emirates, His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, commented that the issues being discussed are all important steps towards integration of the economies of Gulf states, reports Gulf Daily News. He also noted that "Gulf states have a unique cultural, social and anthropological identity which must be respected and preserved."

"The GCC states are not an isolated land and their inter-relationship with

the world makes them have an effect on global political and economic events and also be affected [in return]," Sheikh Khalifa told the Khaleej Times.

The border that Saudi Arabia and Yemen share with Iran will be a topic of special attention, a spokesman of the GCC General Secretariat told Arab News. The Yemeni Foreign Minister is asking for the support of other Gulf states in his request for Tehran to crack down on alleged Iranian aid to rebels in northern Yemen.

Nonetheless, some commentators point out that this GCC Summit is not likely to achieve more than previous meetings. At Dar Al-Hayat, Jameel Theyabi comments that internal squabbling and petty grievances will, as usual, overshadow the larger regional problems. He cites border disputes and rivalries between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, economic disparities across the region, and differences in political attitudes.

"Before each [GCC Summit], many statements are made, promising Gulf citizens of many things, but they soon retreat and go down the drain, or become 'postponed,'" Theyabi writes.

Nevertheless, diplomats from a wide variety of countries stationed in the Gulf have expressed their support for the GCC Summit, reports Kuwait Times. The British, Pakistani, and Swiss Embassies all released statements conveying hopes for the Summit's success.

Touching on a recent controversy affecting both their regions, the Swiss Ambassador Michel Gottret asserted, "We would like to reiterate the fact that the Swiss government has nothing to do with the vote to ban minarets in Switzerland. We are completely against it."

## Dubai Film Festival Offers Bridge between Cultures

At the sixth annual Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) held at the luxurious Madinat Jumeirah resort, Hollywood and Bollywood actors, directors, producers and movie makers from

around the world met to celebrate the world of film, despite Dubai's recent alarming debit crisis and challenges from nearby Abu Dhabi and Doha film festivals, reports Agence France-Presse.

Among the celebrities who attended this year's festival were Matt Dillon, Christopher Lambert, Mandy Moore, Christina Ricci, Omar Sharif and other Arab stars like Khaled al-Sawy, Mostafa Fahmi, Ilham Shaheen and Sumaia al-Khashab. Indian cinema legend Amitabh Bachchan also received a lifetime achievement award honoring his four decades in the movie industry, reports Zawaya. He remarks that "The award is not just recognition of [his] talent but also of Indian cinema."

Perhaps one of the defining components of the DIFF is the Dubai Film Market. The Director of the Dubai Film Market Ziad Yaghi tells Dubai City Guide that the Market "offers unprecedented industry visibility and exposure." He adds that the new category "Dubai Film Connection – Work in Progress" offer a chance to be spotted by potential distributors and leading industry companies, which "can make all the difference for filmmakers."

Last year, the event made over 50 deals possible across various broadcasting channels. In order to further facilitate this buyer-seller interaction this year, the organizers created a Market Lounge whereby industry professionals could network and discuss potential deals, as well as Cinetech, a digital video library equipped with touch-screen technology and private booths for on-site viewing and presentation.

Festival president Abdul Hamid Juma expressed the event's ambition of becoming a link "between different cultures" as this year's show featured 168 films from 55 countries. It opened with the screening of the new musical "Nine," starring Nicole Kidman, Daniel Day-Lewis, Penelope Cruz, Sophia Loren and Marion Cotillard. The festival also screened the new science fiction movie "Avatar", three days before it was released in US movie theaters.

Another film featured in the Arabian gala screening was "City of Life," directed by the Emarati Ali Mostafa. The movie follows the experiences of three characters, an Emarati, an Indian taxi

driver, and a Western lady as they embark on life in Dubai's multi-cultural society. Emirates Business 24/7 anticipates that the film will appeal to international audiences because of the use of multiple languages among its multinational cast showcasing real life in Dubai.

One of the prominent faces at DIFF was Queen Noor of Jordan who gave a keynote speech about the role of media in breaking down cultural barriers. Juma was delighted by the Queen's participation and praised her as "an inspirational role model across the Arab world and globally admired as a humanitarian."

The festival also included a gala dinner, organized for the third year and considered one of the staples of DIFF, followed by an auction to raise funds for the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amFAR) and awareness for Aids prevention.

## Arab Blogging Struggles to Affect Change

A recent conference, 'Mudawanat: All About Blogging,' brought together leading bloggers and technology enthusiasts in Qatar, with the aim of "energizing new and existing bloggers in the country," reports Bonnie James at The Gulf Times. Awareness of the urgent need to adopt and utilize new communication technologies such as blogging and social media networks has been growing throughout the Arab world.

Although blogging is not particularly widespread in the Middle East, Arab bloggers have established a presence on the internet. Findings from a study by Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society indicate that there is a "core group of approximately 35,000 active Arab blogs," reports David Keyes at The Jerusalem Post.

At the conference in Qatar, Ahmad Hamzawi, Google's head of engineering for the Middle East and North Africa, also spoke optimistically about the growth of Arab blogs. "Though only 1% of all content online is in Arabic, the interest in blogging is rising in the Arab world," he said.

The Second Annual Arab Bloggers Workshop is another illustration of the increasing role of blogging in the Arab public sphere, according to Global Voices.

New media technologies in the Arab world face several challenges. For instance, according to The Jerusalem Post, the official telecom body in Egypt recently threatened legal action against those who texted "inappropriate words"-- a broad phrase that could be used to prosecute users who criticize public officials.

Even with these political obstacles, there have been positive developments for the Arab blogosphere. Bonnie James also reports for Gulf Times that the Qatari information and communications ministry recently launched "Digital Qatar," the "first specialized and dedicated blog created by a government agency in the country."

"The objective is to build an online community of tech enthusiasts and start a conversation in Qatar about technology," James continues.

Mohamed Talal Badawi, who founded the largest online community of Arab web developers said that "the last five years have witnessed a boom in social networks, with a 250% growth every year," reports Gulf Times.

In spite of steadily increasing interest, there is still a major disparity in internet presence between the Arab world and its Western counterparts. The leading local blogger, Ammar Mohamed Khaled, stated at the Qatar meet that, "There were only 1,141 bloggers among the 436,000 internet users in Qatar, going by the statistics for 2008."

During his speech at the blogging conference, Hamzawi pointed out that only 16% of the population in the MENA region are active internet users, although that number is constantly growing.

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