

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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The Elusive Under Secretary

In an interview with the Washington Post's Carlos Lozada, former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James Glassman was asked, "Would you have wanted to stay in the job under Obama?" Glassman responded with an unequivocal "Yes."

Glassman revealed that he was never asked to continue in the role. "Did it ever come up, like, did I ever have a conversation with anybody about it? No." At press time the post continues to be vacant.

John Brown, writing for the Huffington Post, questions the need to fill the Under Secretary position. He notes that President Obama's Al-Arabiya interview, a public diplomacy success, in addition to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Asia, "were attained without a PD/PA Under Secretary yet having been chosen." Brown contends that the position "has little real influence or power."

Brown therefore suggests the creation of a new public diplomacy body. "To handle USG information, educational and cultural programs meant to engage, inform and influence key international audiences, create a small, flexible government agency, giving it a name that clearly describes what it does. And call the head of this new entity 'Director.' Everybody knows what a director is. It's a person who actually makes a difference," he argues.

Nevertheless, Brown takes to his own blog to voice his preferred candidate for Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Given his previous skepticism towards the position, selecting the ideal person to fill the post "may seem like an oddity if not a contradiction... But I feel, as a former Foreign Service officer, that perhaps I should voice my preference."

Brown presents Ambassador William

Rugh as the "ideal un-Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs," due to his distinguished 31-year Foreign Service career, his public diplomacy and international broadcasting experience and his knowledge of Arabic and the Arab world. Brown remarks, "How many recent Under Secretaries have such qualifications?... None."

Brown's views are supported by Joshua Fouts at DIP's Dispatches from the Imagination Age. Fouts describes Rugh as an "eminently wise and savvy professional with an entrepreneurial spirit." Rugh would "certainly be a great un-under-secretary... Right now, I'm more interested if they're going to appoint anyone at all."

Countering Extremism through Broadcasting

At a Senate hearing on "Engaging with Muslim Communities," former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright announced a "grand opportunity to reengage the Muslim world to our mutual benefit."

Reengagement first requires an understanding of why differences between the US and the Muslim world exist, according to the testimony of Dalia Mogahed, Executive Director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies. "Our differences are driven by politics - not a clash of principles...[to] further decrease the appeal of violent extremism, we must turn to what I will call the 3 R's: Resolution of conflicts, Reform and Respect."

However, a new survey released by World Public Opinion, discussed by Mohamed Elshinnawi at VOA News, suggests reengagement will be "difficult and complex." Steven Kull, director of World Public Opinion, explains, "Our military presence [in Muslim countries] provoked

a certain response that created a certain sympathy for terrorist groups and probably facilitated for them the recruitment process."

The WPO survey data shows that 70% of those surveyed in Muslim countries disapprove of attacks on American civilians, but large majorities "support the Al-Qaeda goal of ridding the Muslim world of US military bases and troops."

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Writing for Family Security Matters, Dr. Sami Alrabaa also addresses the need to “find ways to reach ordinary Muslims and gain their hearts and minds.” A survey of media trends in five Arab countries by Bielefeld University in 2008 highlights a lack of “alternative media,” according to Alrabaa.

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Dalia Mogahed, Executive Director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies.

More than 80% of adult Muslims watch Saudi and Qatari-owned TV channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Meanwhile, 7% read Arabic newspapers and only 2% read diverse websites. This lack of diversity, argues Alrabaa, makes Muslims “easy prey for Islamist chaplains, who preach hatred and violence against non-Muslims all over the Arab media.”

Helle Dale, writing for Public Diplomacy Magazine, addresses the role the US government should play in “delegitimizing the extremists’ message of hate and fear” and explaining American values and policies. Delle claims a newly-created US agency for strategic communications would help to counter America’s “inexcusable” failure to delegitimize extremism and “tell our national story.”

Dale’s new agency would serve as the “focal point for US informational outreach capabilities,” and would put an end to interagency dysfunctions caused by inter- and intra-departmental territoriality. State Department reform, to include a loss of command of US broadcasting output, and a new strategy and definition of strategic communications, would make communication an “effective, proactive tool” in the war of ideas.

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy has also published a report on the efforts by US international broadcasting to confront radical extremism. The Institute’s report argues that “highly partisan infighting” has severely disrupted the efficacy of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) and Congress.

As a result, Voice of America, Radio Farda, and Al-Hurra have lacked direction, resources and oversight, and have thus “not lived up to their potential in terms of providing alternative sources of news, opinion, and cross-cultural content for which they were designed.” US international broadcasting has therefore been “wholly ineffective in empowering mainstream voices at the forefront of the struggle with radical extremism.”

However, one of the Institute’s recommendations, “to create a BBG of outstanding Americans committed to the spread of enlightened values,” has drawn criticism on the blog of Kim Andrew Elliott. “It looks [like] they want a full-time US public diplomacy informercial channel. How would that compete with Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and BBC?” Elliott complains.

Focusing on the importance of independence and credibility, Elliott argues that “strategically steering content for the “spread of enlightened values” will relieve US international broadcasting of the burden of having an audience,” and will fail as a counter-radicalization strategy.

Reaching Out to Hearts and Minds 101

To win the battle for hearts and minds, modern technology fails to act as a substitute to the people-to-people exchange and dialogue, comments Senator Richard G. Lugar (R, Indiana), for Foreign Policy.

He argues that nearly all of the American cultural centers abroad, “attracting throngs of students and young people who immersed themselves in American publications and ideas, have been closed or drastically downsized and restructured thanks to policy decisions, security concerns, and budget constraints.”

In comparison to France and the UK, who both have cultural centers implanted in most of the world’s capitals (Alliance Française or British Councils), Senator Lugar points out that these centers allow for engaging with friends and foes alike. Such centers would enable “people to meet with Americans of all walks of life and hold two-way conversations on issues of mutual interest.” These centers used to act as forums of exchange and development between the youth and leaders of the host country and the US.

Blaming the “prematurely [self]-declared victory” of the US after the Cold War which brought the closing down of the US Information Agency, Senator Lugar emphasizes that modern technology, the internet, and global satellite TV do not replace the success known by people-to-people exchanges.

“As part of a broader overhaul of its public diplomacy effort, the United States should reinvigorate the old American Centers concept-putting,” he says, by offering cultural events and language classes. Senator Lugar concludes, “America’s best players in public diplomacy have always been its people and its ideas.”

Christopher Badaux, writing for New Ledger, disagrees with Senator Lugar’s suggestions and points out that primarily due to security concerns, these American cultural centers could not open, especially in cities such as Caracas or Jakarta. Badaux adds that US Foreign Service officers themselves may lack the enthusiasm required to be cultural ambassadors for the US.

“I further note that State Department employees being who and what they are, those heartbroken souls are the very sorts one would expect to be chosen to staff these cultural centers,” he says. Badaux finally points out that Senator Lugar’s references date back to the Cold War.

“We were unabashed in our belief that a free-market system (with some unfortunate social democracy) coupled with a popular vote would be close to salvation for the world. We were proud of whom we were,

and we encouraged others to be that way, too.” Noting the lack of confidence and conviction of the American people, Badeaux believes that US public diplomacy has no future if it is to head back to the one-on-one exchanges.

Michael Knigge for DW World concurs with Senator Lugar that the dismantling of the United States Information Agency (USIA) by a joint action taken by the Clinton Administration and the US Congress, and the subsequent closing down of American information and cultural centers around the world have contributed to America’s inability to conduct effective public diplomacy overseas.

Referring to the closing down of one center in Cologne, Germany in 2002, Knigge argues, “I have always felt that for an issue that is as important for the US as public diplomacy (as everyone has come to understand at least after 9/11) Washington should put its money where its mouth is.”

Thus, even though the internet and other modern information tools are and should be a big part of public diplomacy, live forums, a marketplace of ideas where people in cities across the world can meet, talk and debate with Americans, instead of in a virtual chat room, remain essential.

Net Generation Pushes Arab Media Boundaries

Media coverage of the Gaza conflict is evidence of a new media paradigm based on a “participate in, be there” model, writes Matteo Berlucci in New Europe. Livestation.com and its partner broadcaster Al-Jazeera English most successfully took advantage of this new media shift.

According to Berlucci, Livestation realized that “here was a new audience consuming news in a new way and demanding a say in how that news was analyzed and presented.” Interactive web tools such as discussion forums gave viewers a “be there now” experience, and offered broadcasters a “fresh and vibrant source of fresh perspectives.”

This new broadcasting model may be a response to the challenges posed by new media and the blogosphere. On Informed

Comment Juan Cole predicts that “the newspaper as a form of print publication may be on its last legs.” As a result, “lots of new models will likely emerge, since there certainly is a market for news.”

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Matteo Berlucci, Media Critic.

Sarah Alzouman, reporting for the Kuwait Times, also views the “immediacy and accessibility of media in our information age” as a challenge to traditional media. Speaking at the University of Kuwait, George Washington University professor Adel Iskandar noted, “If you have access to a computer, a DSL connection, and a camera, you are essentially a production center.”

For Iskandar, this has tilted the power away from traditional media, since users of media content are no longer “simply consumers... now they are in a position to produce content to create novel material and disseminate it widely.”

The information age challenges traditional media forms by “dismantling the profitability of old business models,” and also serves to “level the global playing field...[thereby] creating a historic opportunity for Middle East media companies,” writes Keach Hagey at The National.

Edward Borgerding, chief executive of Abu Dhabi Media Company (ADMC), argues that the shift “means that the game is reset and everybody is equal; the guys in Europe are equal, the guys in Tokyo are equal, the guys in Los Angeles and New York are equal and the guys in the Middle East are equal...Because the new business models haven’t been created yet, we can create them here.”

Borgerding notes that the Middle East’s lack of an entrenched media industry makes the region more open to new directions. In the UAE specifically, access to capital and a talented skills base are further advantages. However, Borgerding warns of low online and broadband penetration in the region, an issue also raised by Taylor Luck in The Jordan Times. Luck focuses on Jordan, using the 2009 Jordan Media Survey to demonstrate an increasing number of Jordanians who rely on news websites.

The survey showed 16.6% of Jordanians, or 45.9% of total web users, had visited a news website in the last 30 days, with 66.5% choosing Al-Jazeera as their preferred destination. Survey respondents frequently cited the timeliness and credibility of internet sites as reasons to go online for news.

Daoud Kuttab of Ammanet argues that news websites “provide a public space for dialogue not found in the political sphere or traditional media outlets,” and the interactive nature of the sites “has given a voice to previously ‘silent citizens.’”

Moreover, the technological revolution may be even more pronounced in the Arab world because of certain demographic factors, according to Xpress. Over 50% of the population in Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco and Egypt is under 25 years old, and can be characterized as being part of the “net generation.”

The latest edition of the Arab Media Outlook Report explains, “[the] unique demographic profile of the region presents exciting opportunities for online media owners, content developers, operators and all parties along the media value chain.”

Writing for The Daily Star, Esraa al-Shafei also comments on the power of the internet and its effect on the region’s youth, terming it “one of the most liberating forces in the Middle East.” Shafei notes that “many young people across the Middle East are using the internet to build powerful indigenously self-created digital communities.”

However, some worry about the impact of new media content on Arabic language and literature. Boie Conrad Dublin at the Arab Times interviewed Adel Iskandar about the rise of citizen journalism in which Iskandar argues that the fact that anyone can produce content has led to a “violation and vulgarization of the textual form,” due to the incessant use of “profane language.”

Meanwhile, at the Emirates Airline International Festival of Literature (EAIFL), prominent Arab writers debated the “internet’s role in ‘polluting’ the Arabic language and making it more superficial,” reports Abbas Al-Lawati at Gulf News.

Assyrian Iraqi writer Samuel Shimon argues that although the internet has impacted Arabic language, it has also given Arabic literature a geographical reach that was previously impossible. “Now an Arabic writer in Abu Dhabi can have an audience from Casablanca to Australia... We can actually call it Arabic literature now because it can finally reach all parts of the Arab world.”

At New Europe, Alexandros Koronakis concludes that the dramatic shift in the media landscape has left traditional media “in a panic,” in which “traffic is now becoming more important than mission statements,” due to falling advertising revenue. Koronakis warns that established brands like CNN risk losing their reputation with headlines such as “How to get Michelle Obama’s toned arms.”

For Koronakis, the “haphazard” response of old media to the exponential rise of new online media forms is evidence of the impact of new media.

“New Media” Necessitate New Mentality

The popularity of “new media” including social networking websites, blogs and citizen journalism has forced the US to adapt to a new media climate. “Social media is a rapidly evolving ecosystem... there’s no rulebook. Social media is a giant, chaotic experiment,” argues Mark Drapeau of Cheeky Fresh.

This media shift has transformed the traditional notion of the audience. “Citizens are not mere receiving vessels for press releases and whatever you put on your government website,” continues Drapeau. “They are not a captive audience.” Instead, the modern-day audience is comprised of “groups of individuals having conversations with their families at the proverbial watercooler.”

Jay Rosen of NYU’s PressThink agrees

with Drapeau’s characterization of the new media consumer. For Rosen, “the people formerly known as the audience are those who were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern.” Today’s audience utilizes “tools that were once exclusively used by media people to capture and hold their attention,” Rosen continues.

“Users are deciding what the point of their engagement will be – what application, what device, what time, what place.”

Tom Curley, Associated Press CEO.

Likewise, Associated Press CEO Tom Curley explains that “users are deciding what the point of their engagement will be – what application, what device, what time, what place.”

This new dynamic has important implications for public diplomacy and the way that governments are able to disseminate their messages. In an examination of public diplomacy in the digital age, PBS suggests that “much of this war of ideas will be played out on new media such as the internet.”

Drapeau similarly emphasizes the need for governments to “pay more attention to their brands” in light of these new media developments. “Organizations should talk to people with whom they hope to create relationships, because word of mouth is still the most powerful force for spreading trusted information. If you don’t know who’s out there talking about your brand, how do you know who to influence when the time comes?” he asks. Drapeau points to Colleen Graffy’s use of Twitter to connect with overseas journalists as part of her State Department public diplomacy mission as an example of such outreach.

Twitter, a social networking and micro-

blogging service that enables users to send and read other users’ updates of up to 140 characters in length, is one particular new media technology that has received significant press coverage.

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Mark Drapeau, Cheeky Fresh.

In Eureka Deja Vu, Rita King comments that having Members of Congress “twittering” isn’t necessarily a bad thing “if they use it properly.” King argues that “what Members of Congress choose to say...tells us something about them as people. And that’s valuable in a democracy.” She nevertheless cautions that “it is beneficial for people to have a discernment process over what’s worth saying and which fleeting thoughts are best left to the recesses of one’s own mind.”

William Bradley of the Huffington Post is less enthusiastic about Twitter. Bradley predicts an atmosphere of “commentators, conventional and unconventional alike, tweeting feverishly into the ether, hoping their bleeps capture a moment’s attention.” He further argues that “if there’s one thing our media culture has already been lacking, it’s context.”

Meanwhile, PBS also highlights potentially dangerous implications of the advances in internet technology. “With the rapid proliferation of internet technology, some in the national security community are

turning their attention to the possibility of large-scale online attacks – cyber-terrorism – and how public diplomacy may prevent them,” notes the news site.

While there is little evidence that terrorists have “weaponized the internet,” continues PBS, they “have turned the internet into a battlefield in the war of ideas.” PBS therefore concludes that “without effectual public diplomacy gains, the specter of cyber-terrorism will grow more vivid as a new generation of would-be terrorists comes of age.”

X- Life

Founder and Chief Executive Officer of MetroStar Sytems, Inc., Ali Reza Manouchehri is combining technology with his culturally-diverse background and commitment to celebrating our commonalities. Manouchehri hopes to use technology as a tool for cultural exchange and as a means to break down communication barriers, reports Business Maktoob.

His latest endeavor, X-Life Game, harnesses the power of mobile gaming to demystify the United States to an international audience, specifically Middle East, Persian Gulf, and Arab youth.

Proponents of public diplomacy 2.0 support the latest American attempt to win hearts and minds in the Middle East and Persian Gulf with the cell phone game, reports CNN. The State Department is spending \$415,000 for the project in the hope it will help people improve their English skills and learn about the United States.

“It is just one small part of our outreach,” said Tim Receveur of the State Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs. Receveur is spreading the word through social networking sites such as Facebook and mySpace, and a formal publicity push may come later.

The goal is to have 10,000 people tapping away on X-Life in 12 months, says Manouchehri.

Given that cell phones are far more available than computers in the region, it ensures a broader outreach. Eventually the game may be made available both online and by cell phone, reports CNN. The State Department says the game was developed to bridge cultures, encourage exchanges, and break down barriers.

It also aims to show the United States in a positive light and illustrate US values such as tolerance, freedom, and respect of religious differences, says Manouchehri.

Steve Garfield, a Boston video blogger, media adviser, and teacher at Boston University, sampled X-Life and found the game easy to download but somewhat frustrating to play, comments the news site. Glitches or not, the game is gaining an audience around the globe, with people signing on from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, South America, and Africa.

Manouchehri’s path-breaking mobile application is reinventing public diplomacy, using an emerging new media platform to engage the minds of foreign audiences by educating them about the realities of American culture, reports Business Maktoob. This unique approach is the embodiment of “e-diplomacy,” and reflects the new “soft diplomacy” approach favored by the Obama Administration.

Saudi Scandal over Movies

A Saudi religious scholar is accusing a royal tycoon and another Saudi businessman of being as dangerous as drug dealers because the TV channels they own broadcast movies, reports Associated Press. However, the news site points out that the edict is highly unusual as it targets two of the most prominent Saudi figures, namely Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, one of the world’s richest people, and Waleed Al-Ibrahim, a brother-in-law of the late King Fahd.

Al- Waleed owns Rotana, a popular network of Arabic satellite channels airing movies and music videos. Waleed Al-Ibrahim owns the Dubai-based MBC Group media conglomerate, which includes several satellite channels that broadcast movies, entertainment, news, and children’s programs in Arabic and English, including American and European sitcoms and movies, reports the news site.

Youssef Al-Ahmed, a professor in the Islamic law department at the conservative al-Imam University, issued the edict Saturday in response to a question regarding Al-Waleed’s assertions last month that the kingdom will have movie theaters one day and that movies play a “positive” social role in Saudi Arabia. Convinced that the industry encourages

debauchery and decadence, cinemas were banned in the 1980s amidst a rise of conservatism throughout the country.

“Movies are a tool that hypocrites use to implement their plot to Westernize society, corrupt it and drive it away from (religion),” said Al-Ahmed in his response, posted on Islamlight.net, an Islamic Web site with news, columns, and edicts.

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Youssef Al-Ahmed, a professor in the Islamic law at al-Imam University.

Despite the lack of movie theaters, several Saudi filmmakers have produced films that have won regional awards.

Robert Paul Reyes, writer for News Blaze, exposes the absurdity of the situation by explaining that in the Saudi Kingdom “it’s a grave sin to broadcast movies on TV, but it’s perfectly kosher for a public official to incite citizens to murder the owners of satellite TV stations.”

Denouncing the repressive regime enforced by overzealous clerics and the religious police, he notes that people are still able to have access to movies and US sitcoms in the privacy of their homes.

The hard-line scholar also accused Arab TV execs of encouraging the “deviance of thousands of people,” continues Variety. Another Saudi cleric, Sheik Saleh al-Lihedan, issued a fatwa in September last year stating that it was permissible for the owners of pan-Arab satellites to be killed, accusing them of broadcasting corrupting programming.

The most recent outburst appears to have come as a result of a statement made by Prince Waleed that the current ban on cinemas in Saudi Arabia, which has existed

since the early 1980s, would soon be reversed. Variety explains that the prince has already made attempts to change the law and last December publicly screened Saudi film “Menahi,” which he financed, for a week in Jeddah. The makeshift auditorium was soon shut down by hard-line authorities.

Yet, according to Samar Fatany for Arab News, Saudi society is witnessing a new era of freedom and the Ministry of Culture and Information should be commended for empowering the media and encouraging openness and cultural diversity. This is being spurred by a national campaign to promote openness and engage with other cultures around the world is generating debates in Saudi Arabia.

“The role of the ministry in organizing literary events and cultural festivities is greatly appreciated by the intellectual community, including artists, writers, film producers and concerned parents anxious to provide a healthy cultural environment for their children and enhance their talents and artistic skills,” Fatany points out.

Skeptics maintain that without the proper institutions to back up such initiatives, Saudi Arabia will remain at an amateurish level in the cultural and literary fields. Fatany insists that there should indeed be more financing for the arts, culture, music, and audio visual arts such as cinema.

The Ministry of Culture and Information sets the media policies that govern the local press, national radio, and TV channels. Its role is to adopt an effective strategy that allows upgrading of services and performance. Fatany comments that however, the harsh restrictions imposed both on media and cultural activities have delayed efforts to advance the social environment.

While most Saudis turn to international media outlet for news due to the heavy censorship in their country, the ministry should live up to its responsibility of supporting “ a strong media that allow writers and journalists freedom of expression and access to information so that the public stays well informed and up-to-date with matters of individual and national concern.”

Fatany concludes, “We are engaged in a media war, and we are losing the battle because of our inadequate journalistic capabilities.”

“Today” on Al-Hurra

Al-Hurra Television will launch Al-Youm (Arabic for ‘Today’), a ground-breaking live new television show originating simultaneously from five countries in three

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Joaquin Blaya, BBG Governor.

continents including Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Al-Hurra’s headquarters in Springfield, Va., reports AME Info.

The three-hour program will provide viewers a window to the world through its coverage of the latest news from the Middle East, the US, and the world, as well as looking at topics such as health, entertainment news, sports, technology, social, and cultural issues.

Claiming to engage with the audience, the program will include interviews with politicians, athletes, business leaders, and prominent figures in the arts.

“Al-Youm is a natural next step as Al-Hurra increases its audience engagement and advances technologically,” stated BBG Governor Joaquin Blaya. “Al-Youm is an excellent complement to the programming that is on Al-Hurra and will be the cornerstone of our prime-time programming.”

Located in Dubai’s Media City, Al Youm is co-anchored by Jessy Trad and Ahmed El Naggar, who are joined by Mona Wehbi in Beirut, Amr Khalil in Cairo, and Eman Haddad in Jerusalem, along with news updates from Al-Hurra’s headquarters

outside of Washington, DC, reports Trade Arabia.

“We wanted to test our limits to have a program that was not only technologically-advanced but also engaging for the viewers. The audience will contribute to the dynamism of the show and tie it to the issues of today,” stated Fran Mires, Al-Youm’s executive producer.

Recent surveys of the Middle East by research companies such as ACNielsen show that Al-Hurra has a weekly reach of an estimated 26 million adults, the official said.

e-Censorship in the Arab World

Internet censorship continues to be a hotly debated issue throughout the Middle East. In the UAE, the government strictly regulates what websites are viewable to their citizens in order “to protect the moral, cultural and religious values” of the country, according to the Emarat Business Review. Nevertheless, programs such as Anchorfree have allowed more tech-savvy residents of the UAE to circumvent many of the internet restrictions, but such an option is not widely available.

“Five of the 15 countries defined as ‘internet enemies’ are in the Middle East: Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia.”

The Daily Star.

In Morocco, Hassan Barhon has been sent to jail for accusing city government officials of corruption and collusion in one of his blog entries. Barhon circulated a petition calling Mohamed Masmouki, prosecutor-general for the king of Morocco, a “dangerous

criminal,” reports the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Officially, Barhon was charged with “defaming a member of the judicial body,” an offense that is punishable by up to five years in prison. His detention is representative of the declining freedom of press in Morocco in the past decade and is very worrisome to proponents of free journalism worldwide.

A recent Daily Star report stated that “five of the 15 countries defined as ‘internet enemies’ are in the Middle East: Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Tunisia,” with five more Middle Eastern countries on the brink of entering the group. The news site notes that “internet legislation in all its forms is an indicator of the degree of freedom in a country.”

The more freedom of information, communication and media in a country, along with personal freedoms and democracy, the less internet legislation and government interference, continues the Daily Star.

Meanwhile, at the Emirates International Festival of Literature in Dubai the issue of censorship was brought to the forefront after a book featuring a homosexual sheik was not allowed to debut at the event.

While some at the festival declared “censorship a ‘myth’ because of the internet revolution,” Jordanian author Ibrahim Nasrallah stated that he is experiencing more difficulties with censorship now than ever, reports the Khaleej Times. Replacing the straightforward bans on certain material of the past are severe lawsuits and ostracism for the more progressive authors of the region, like Nasrallah.

Clinton Caught in Palestinian Stalemate

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton travelled to the Middle East this month with onlookers hoping to see a new diplomatic approach to the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma, reports Scott McLeod for Time Magazine. Her visit to the Egyptian-hosted donor conference on Gaza at Sharm el-Sheikh falls in the shadow of eight years of failed Bush policy, dismal prospects for Iraq and Afghanistan and the ongoing threat of Iranian nuclear

activities.

Among the numerous challenges at play are the postwar humanitarian crisis in Gaza, leadership struggles on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides and pervasive American sentiment against legitimizing Hamas as a governing body or negotiation partner.

“The generous donors seem unwilling to admit that they are perpetuating a wasteful cycle of Palestinian and international construction in Palestine that is being set back by repeated Israeli destruction through war, followed by repeated rounds of reconstruction.”

Rami Khouri, The Daily Star.

Clinton talked to Arab press, including Al-Arabiya, about a two-state solution and spoke highly of working with the Palestinians – namely Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. The donors raised more than the \$3 billion the PA requested, with the US contributing \$0.9 billion, according to Juan Cole.

Clinton also publicly criticized settlement activity in Jerusalem, and called for the Israeli government to allow relief efforts in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

Highlighting another key concern, Nathan Brown of the Carnegie Endowment for Middle East Peace and George Washington University notes that money was never the key problem in the first place. Rather, the question is how to actually get aid to Gazans who need it. “Gaza is destroyed, so we’re going to rebuild (Ramallah?)” Brown quips in the Foreign Policy blog.

As the situation stands so far, the donors’ aid pledges allocate two-thirds of the relief money to the West Bank, rather than Gaza. The remaining third designated for Gaza may not even reach Gazans if Israel refuses to allow relief inside the borders, reports Reuters.

Additionally, GWU’s Marc Lynch remarked in Foreign Policy that Clinton “came across as doing her best Condi Rice impression” with her focus on Abbas and Fayyad as the main Palestinian partners for negotiation. Lynch notes that the Bush administration’s two-year-old failed policy of “West Bank first and Fatah only” is worn and ineffective.

“This all seems stuck in a bit of time-warp,” Lynch writes. “It ignores the two year history of Israeli and Western failure under the identical discourse and policy to deliver meaningful benefits to the Palestinian Authority or the West Bank. It ignores the reality of Hamas power in Gaza, and the reality of Fatah’s limited capabilities and legitimacy (which were not enhanced, shall we say, by Abbas’s performance during the Gaza war).”

Many analysts, Lynch and Brown among them, see Clinton’s remarks as a mere continuation of this strategy.

With Hamas’ position as potential negotiating partner contingent on bowing to Quartet demands, Tamara Wittes of Brookings points out in Foreign Policy that Hamas’ political compliance is key. If Hamas does not comply the potential for Gaza residents to receive aid would be threatened.

Furthermore, some analysts point out that if talks fail another Palestinian humanitarian crisis is inevitable. Rami Khouri says in Lebanon’s Daily Star that “the generous donors seem unwilling to admit that they are perpetuating a wasteful cycle of Palestinian and international construction in Palestine that is being set back by repeated Israeli destruction through war, followed by repeated rounds of reconstruction.”

Nathan Brown adds that the Bush administration “squandered the quiet provided by the last cease-fire on futile diplomacy among weak and lame-duck leaders.” Khouri also argues in the Daily Star that it is irresponsible to equate Hamas rockets with Israeli settlements. “These are not parallel or equal actions and should not be bundled into a package of moral or political equivalence. Both must stop if peace and normalcy are to reign one day for both people, but lasting peace requires the ability to grapple with the deeper causes of the conflict,” Khouri insists. International analysts have called for America to put teeth in its measures against Israeli aggression.

The urgency of the situation grows on both sides. Nablus Governor Jamal Muhaysin warned just prior to the visit that, if talks fail, Fatah would be left with no alternative to violence. “He who thinks that Fatah’s only alternative is the negotiations is wrong. Rather, all alternatives, including the armed struggle, would be open if our extended hand for peace was not met with reciprocity,” he said, speaking to a crowd of 100,000 at the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s Al-Bay’ah festival in Nablus.

Muhaysin characterized Israeli settlement building and other efforts as “actions of war.” The Baltimore Sun notes that Hamas already began rocket attacks once more after Obama’s inauguration.

In the midst of these negotiations sentiment in the Arab world seems tentatively poised to view the new administration as merely a perpetuator of the status quo. The Arabist urges the international community to revisit its views on Hamas, regardless of American prerequisites to discussions, lamenting that “America is still an obstacle, not a leader, in Israeli-Arab peace.”

Reiterating these calls, a group of diplomats wrote a missive to The Times urging the Quartet to deal with Hamas, echoing Israeli leader Moshe Dayan’s famous quip, “If you want to make peace, you talk to your enemies.”

As reported in Haaretz, these high level leaders include Israel’s former Foreign Affairs Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, former UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Alvaro De Soto and former leader of the Social Democratic Liberal Party of Northern Ireland John

Hume.

Finally, Shibley Telhami concludes in Time Magazine that, in light of Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran, “Arab-Israeli peace is an American interest, not just charity work.”

Restructuring Arab Media Online

Electronic media growth is expected to skyrocket in some areas of the Middle East, particularly in Yemen over the coming year, reports the Yemen Post. A report released by the Dubai Press Club in collaboration with the PricewaterhouseCoopers, found that one of the main reasons for the expectation is that the Arab World is ripe for electronic media, such as digital TV and mobile media, to boom.

Based on studies that covered twelve Arab countries including Yemen, the report says the countries all have a young demographic. The report notes that 50 percent of populations in Yemen, Oman, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are aged less than twenty-five years old, adding that internet users aged less than twenty-five years form 35-47 percent of the total population of each country.

“Two weeks ago, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology submitted a draft law to Parliament that aims to regulate media releases,” according to the Yemen Post. Under the proposed law, those who wish to set up new media websites must seek permission from authorities and already established websites must consult authorities before publishing news.

Websites which publish news about government misconduct, according to the draft law, could receive a punishment of up to six years in prison. The project lays down strict measures regulating the getting and releasing of news, neglecting the fact that Yemen is a democratic state which must ensure freedom of expression, reports the Yemen Post.

The project has not yet been approved and has been dismissed by most MPs who say it aims to undermine an approved media law earlier submitted by MP Ali Ashal, concludes the news site.

In other news, the Ministerial Council for

Services passed a proposal put forward by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) on the UAE domain in Arabic (Emarat) on the internet, according to Business 24/7.

The project falls in line with the new approach by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers to create equivalent domains in languages other than English. The UAE domain in English is .ae. The domain in Arabic will contribute to increasing the number of surfers to Arabic sites and further promote and strengthen the UAE’s identity.

New Market for Satellite Media at the CabSat 2009

SmartSat has officially launched a groundbreaking project that will send the Arab World’s first private satellite into orbit, reports AME Info. This is considered a key initiative that will help broadband and broadcast service providers add more value to their satellite-enabled services and ultimately ensure better quality offerings for end-users in the region.

Leveraging the new satellite’s state-of-the-art mobile communications systems, SmartSat will enable clients to tailor broadband packages that satisfy specific market segment demands and subsequently optimize revenue potential, according to AME Info.

Faisal al Anjari, Chairman of Al-Jawhara Holding, explains, “The USD 500 million SmartSat project, specifically the launch of a new satellite into orbit, is a testament to our commitment to actively participate in the economic transformation of the region.”

SmartSat is looking forward to introducing radical improvements in the satellite sector, resulting in more business opportunities for broadband and broadcast service providers, while ensuring better quality and a wider range of value offerings for end-users. SmartSat also revealed that it will adopt the latest state-of-the-art satellite technology to ensure a truly powerful platform that can satisfy the emerging demands of regional clients.

Delivering a keynote speech at the opening session of CabSat 2009 Broadcasting conference, Abu Dhabi Media Company CEO Edward Borgerding said media and advertising in the Middle East were different from the rest of the world, reports Zawya. The CabSat 2009 Broadcasting conference is being held alongside CabSat Exhibition.

“The launch of a new satellite into orbit, is a testament to our commitment to actively participate in the economic transformation of the region.”

Faisal al Anjari, Chairman of Al-Jawhara Holding.

“I believe the reason why electronic media is not fairly priced compared to print, is the lack of people meters. Media have no proof to the number of viewers they have, and are, therefore, unable to claim the larger budgets,” argues Borgerding. Borgerding said that cultural issues related to installing people meters in the UAE need to be taken into consideration, but it shouldn’t be an obstacle to achieving this goal.

He also focused on the challenges facing traditional media versus mobile and broadband. “One of the major challenges of the digital age is the availability of culture for free.” He concluded that with advertising revenue falling, media will need to work out how to finance the production of more content.

Harris Corporation, an international communications and information technology company, was awarded a contract to provide an integrated large-

scale broadcast solution to the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) as part of a major facility upgrade, at the CabSat 2009 Broadcasting conference in Dubai, reports Web Wire.

The Harris solution — including automation, servers, core processing, multiviewers, test and measurement, branding, and routers — represents a cutting-edge broadcasting modernization project in the country.

“As a Harris Authorized Dealer in Iraq, we are delighted to be providing not only a full Harris broadcast solution to the IMN, but also local training and on-site installation, and one year of on-site technical support assistance,” said Engineer Yasir T.Rashid, KTBS country manager.

Harris Broadcast Communications provides products, systems, and services that deliver interoperable workflow solutions that span the entire media delivery chain. The Harris ONE solution brings together highly integrated and cost-effective products that are ideal for emerging media business models and for customers upgrading media operations to digital and high-definition services.

“The broadcast market in Iraq is in full expansion, and Harris is pleased to have been chosen to support the modernization of the broadcasting infrastructure at the IMN,” noted Said Bacho, managing director, Harris Broadcast Middle East.

The Rise of Interactive TV

The Arab Media Group’s Arab Television Network (ATN) is preparing to launch a raft of interactive participation TV features, reports Digital Production Middle East. ATN is set to tap into the interactive TV market as it look to differentiate its channels, which include MTV Arabia and Nickelodeon Arabia, from the 450 competing free-to-air stations.

“We are expecting a great response from our audience and ultimately a higher market share as a result both of the creative and the technology aspects of our participation TV project,” said Khadeeja Al Marzooqi, general manager of Arab Media Group’s Arabian Digital Network.

AMG can use the tool to track consumers from medium to medium, communicate with them individually, and tailor content and advertizing to suit them. Broadcasters can also use the Interactivity Suite to integrate user-submitted content into their programming, according to Digital Production Middle East.

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Khadeeja Al Marzooqi, General Manager of Arabian Digital Network.

The launch of Middle East Television (METV) in Abu Dhabi was announced amidst huge excitement and anticipation surrounding the substantial recent investment in the broadcasting industry in the Mena region, possibly generating new professional opportunities, reports AME Info.

METV will quickly establish itself as the regions only vertical content event for creating, co-producing, and buying, selling, financing and distributing entertainment content across all platforms. The new site further comments that the event will provide the Mena regions key decision-makers in the TV, film, digital and audiovisual content, production, and distribution industry with the only professional networking forum, where they will discover global trends and content rights issues on a truly international

level.

The recent trend, coupled with the increased interest in the broadcast industry currently coming from within the Middle East, Turkey, Russia, India and China, supports METV's aspirations to become the unique platform for broadcasting professionals looking to negotiate and develop content for all platforms.

"Staged over 3 days from 3-5 November later this year METV will see the worlds broadcast content creation, co-producing, buying, selling, financing and distributing entertainment professionals come together for the first time in the Mena region," reports AME Info.

METV aims to attract the who's, who of the broadcasting industry, whilst providing young local filmmakers from across the Mena region and TV wannabes with a unique networking experience in the heart of the Arab World.

Successes and Setbacks for Women in the Arab World

The Tunisian Mother's Association celebrated International Women's Day as well as their two year chairmanship of the Arab Women's Organization (AWO), aiming to make great strides to foster open dialogue and to engage in discussion regarding women's rights across the Middle East, reports Tunisia Online News. Leila Ben Ali, the representative of the AWO, says that she will use this opportunity to better the image of Tunisia internationally through its role, promoting the position of Arab women in all sectors.

United Press International reports that according to the head of the Dubei fatwa department, Dr Ahmed Al-Haddad, women have the right to become mufti, the position in Islam where the Koran and the teachings of Mohammad is applied to modern life, and issue fatwas.

He ruled that a becoming a mufti is dependent on knowledge not gender. Al-Arabiya points out that none of the 41 articles in the Fatwa Charter preclude women from creating fatwas.

According to UNHCR Refworld, women are

playing a growing role in and as leaders of opposition organizations of Syria. President of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change and gynecologist, Fida al-Hourani, has become the heroine of the opposition fighting for greater freedom in Syria and recently has been sentenced for 30 months in prison for "weakening national sentiment." Despite the growth of women in these movements, men still dominate the opposition both in body and ideology.

The Middle East Times reports on the violence against women in the Middle East, rarely reported on, writing that one in three women are domestically abused and that many countries overlook violence against women. This violence is not always physical and often emotional and psychological. The lack of coverage allows a cycle of violence to continue, while sexual violence has led to an increase in sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies.

The article stresses that this violence against women, often tied to Islam, is not justified or permitted in the Koran and Islamic experts say "that Islam rejects the abuse." Lastly it calls for people from a variety of sectors to unite against the violence of women in the Arab world.

Working against domestic violence, Ryn Momtaz, of CNN, writes that the government in Amman, Jordan has established a women's shelter, the "Home for Family Harmony," for women and girls escaping domestic abuse or "honor crimes," where a relative kills a woman to protect the family honor if a relationship is suspected "or even a phone conversation with a non-related male."

The shelter is a safe place for the women and provides vocational training, schooling, and mediation between women and their families, serving like a half-way house, for six months. While there, the women have the freedom to act as girlfriends and share common relationships; the shelter becomes a place of hope.

In Jordan, NGOs are working on a project to prevent domestic violence by encouraging women to report crimes and providing training courses for people of the justice system that target women. With 600 cases of domestic abuse reported last year, the project hopes to educate and raise awareness within Jordan, according to ANSAmed.

Basic rights for women are being fought for throughout the Arab world. In Saudi Arabia, as reported by Trends Updates, women are fighting for the right to purchase their own lingerie and for children's stores to have only women in service roles. "Religious police" patrol malls, forcing women to stay at home and preventing the laws allowing women to sell women's lingerie from being applied. For women in Saudi Arabia, the struggle for basic rights continues.

Rania Abouzeid writes that the trafficking and selling of women in Iraq since the US occupation has risen into the tens of thousands, and continues to increase unreported. Conditions in Iraq are so bad that mothers are selling their daughters both internationally and within Iraq with nothing being done to prevent the trafficking.

Europe Turkmen Friendships requests a thought for the women and girls of Iraq, on International Women's Day, who are "victims of bad treatments, rape, trafficking and exploitation" and asks those in power in Iraq to act against these crimes immediately. Despite increased advocacy and work to improve the lives of women in the Middle East, many issues and basic rights are still being ignored.

President Obama's Conundrum

The Huffington Post writes, "The revitalization of American diplomacy and power has begun." While some have high hopes for the new government, others doubt that real change will actually take place, and still others do not think that extremely

"The revitalization of American diplomacy and power has begun."

Jacob Heilbrunn, The Huffington Post

bold policies should be implemented.

As reported by The New York Times, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently visited the Middle East in a first move towards establishing better relations with the region. In terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Secretary Clinton advocated a “two-state solution anchored by broad regional peace,” as well as “strong American support for the Palestinian Authority president, Mahmoud Abbas.”

The Obama administration is also re-examining America’s current relationship with Syria with Secretary Clinton announcing “diplomatic re-engagement” with the country. According to an editorial in The New York Times, former president George W. Bush made a mistake by pushing Syria away from the US and sending the country into the arms of Iran. One step that President Obama is taking towards reconciling this relationship, The Daily Beast reports, is sending not one, but two envoys to Syria. The Huffington Post adds that “detaching Syria from Iran would further help weaken the revolutionary power of the Iranian revolution.”

In Democracy Arsenal, Ilan Goldenberg turns to the issue of Iraq. Obama’s recent speech on the future of US involvement in Iraq was not an easy one to give, as he had to guarantee Iraqis that the US is indeed pulling combat troops out of the country, but not abandoning it during its reconstruction. He also had to clarify to the rest of the world that America’s foreign policy will no longer be “Iraq-centric.”

According to Goldenberg, Obama’s speech regarding Iraq was “more than just the beginning of the end of the war.” It also described the administration’s foreign policy as a whole. Goldenberg writes, “The speech demonstrates that on issues of foreign policy, communication is vital.” In addition, Obama’s plans for Iraq reflect his broader foreign policies. He is not simply focusing on the military aspect, but on “political reconciliation and diplomatic engagement with Iraq’s neighbors.”

Nevertheless, skepticism abounds. For example, James Abourezk of Counter Punch does not believe that meetings between American Secretaries of State and the Israeli leadership or Mahmoud Abbas will bring about any real progress.

Others, such as Leslie Gelb of The Daily Beast, do not think that the new government should propose drastic foreign policy changes, or at least not immediately. Gelb writes, “It’s certainly a bad practice to constantly fill the international airwaves with bold new initiatives, new thinking and

commentary.”

According to Gelb, the “constant flood of big ideas” is bothersome because it reveals that Obama is self-confident enough to think that he “can make decisions on the most complicated of issues after only hours of discussion.”

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