

# The Layalina Review

## On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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### Pakistan Un-friends Facebook

A Pakistani court recently ordered a ban on the social networking site Facebook following the controversial “Let’s Draw Mohammed Day” campaign, generated by a user intending to express solidarity with the creators of the Comedy Central show “South Park,” reports Al-Jazeera. A recent episode of the show irked some Muslim groups by depicting Muhammad in a bear suit.

However, cartoonist Molly Norris cancelled the event after deciding that it had been misunderstood by too many uncontrollable parties.

The Facebook page for “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day” had drawn over 40,000 members, while the opposing “Against Everybody Draw Mohammed Day” had more than 53,000 members, according to Al-Jazeera. The page has created an outcry in Pakistan, as any depiction of the Prophet is forbidden by Islam and considered sacrilegious.

The Islamic Lawyers Movement, who brought the case to the Lahore High Court Telecommunication Authority (PTA) complained that the page called “Draw Mohammed Day” was blasphemous, and called for an immediate ban. Supporters of the ban stood outside the court, waving banners condemning Facebook.

“We have already blocked the URL link [for Facebook] and issued instruction to internet service providers,” Khurram Mehran, a spokesperson for the PTA, said, although some users claimed that the ban will not prevent them from using the site.

“We are not trying to slander the average Muslim,” the Facebook page creators wrote on the information section of the page, which was still accessible at time of publishing, reports the British newspaper The Daily Mail. They added,

“We simply want to show the extremists that threaten to harm people because of their Mohammad depictions that we’re not afraid of them ... they can’t take away our right to freedom of speech by trying to scare us into silence.”

Alex Rodriguez explains in the Los Angeles Times that it will be difficult to entirely ban the site as it is hugely popular in Pakistan, which enjoys 45 million users, slightly more than 10 percent of the total number of Facebook members. The internet, and Facebook in particular, is widely used by bloggers as a venue to debate politics and social issues that cannot be approached in a public space.

“They should have regard for sentiments of Muslims, and they should not repeat such displays,” Pakistani Information Technology Secretary Najibullah Malik said on Pakistani television. “They should know that if they are going to do such activities, certainly their business will suffer.”

Rodriguez points out that this latest Facebook shutdown in Pakistan adds the long list of clashes between those advocating free speech and the those espousing the tenets of Islam, which prohibit the depiction of Muhammad.

But Pakistan stepped up its campaign on prohibiting blasphemous content by extending the ban to YouTube, Wikipedia, Twitter, mobile Blackberry services, and a number of other websites, reports Issam Ahmed for The Christian Science Monitor. Ahmed explains that the move is perceived as acquiescence to the fury that the Facebook campaign generated.

The Pakistani government justified the extension of the ban to other sites as a means to prevent people from accessing the campaign by other ways. According to Alexa.com, which tracks web traffic, Facebook is the second most popular website globally, YouTube is third and Wikipedia is sixth.

Blackberry users received text messages from their service providers informing them of the ban to comply with government instructions, while Wahaj-us-Siraj, CEO of internet service provider Nayatel, told Reuters that his company had been asked to block the popular video sharing website YouTube.

Although the ban is set to last until the next hearing on May 31, it has been expanded to photo-sharing website Flickr and the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. In the meantime, politicians have either been silent on the issue or have expressed their support of the ban.

Ahmed remarks, “Talha Mehmood,

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chairman of the Senate standing committee on interior affairs, urged the government to redefine its relations with the West against the backdrop of an increase in incidents hurting religious sentiments of the Muslims.”

*“Why on earth should Islam be given any immunity to criticism, hiding like ostriches and constantly getting offended is what has made us so backward?”*

*Nabiha Meher Shaikh,  
Pakistani student.*

Some critics of the ban believe that this is a massive step backward socially for Pakistan, while others interpret it as a symptom of the growing entanglement of religion and the Pakistani judiciary system. “Why on earth should Islam be given any immunity to criticism? Hiding like ostriches and constantly getting offended is what has made us so backward.” comments Pakistani student Nabiha Meher Shaikh.

The judiciary is also keenly aware of the popular impact of its decisions, and has become a highly politicized institution, Shaikh argues. “It is a natural consequence of the movement for the restoration of the judiciary that the judges keep public’s sentiments as much in mind as they do law. More often than not they have made ‘popular’ decisions,” he says, referring to a popular movement in recent years to reinstate dozens of deposed judges.

In the meantime, Facebook has expressed its disappointment over the reaction in Pakistan, and said they are considering some sort of legal action, “which may include making this content inaccessible to users in Pakistan.”

## Miss USA: Made in Lebanon

Arab Americans cheered following the vote to grant the title of Miss America 2010 to Lebanese-born Rima Fakhri, reports CNN. “For once, we’re talking about beauty and not terror,” said Osama Siblani, publisher of The Arab-American News, in Dearborn, Michigan.

Rima Fakhri, who will represent the United States in the Miss Universe pageant later this year, immigrated from Srifa, a small town in Southern Lebanon, to the United States when she was seven years old. She attended a Catholic school in New York until 2003, when her family later moved to Michigan.

She went on to graduate from the University of Michigan with a degree in economics. Fakhri was a resident of Dearborn, home to a large Arab-American community, prior to her crowning as Miss USA.

While Miss USA’s family is of Muslim origins, they do not consider themselves conservatives and according to various sources, Ms. Fakhri celebrates both Christian and Muslim holidays. Rami Haddad, who assisted with Fakhri’s publicity campaign in Michigan, responded to comments on her religion that above all, Fakhri is “American, and ... religion does not have to play any role in this.”

Either way, Samar Boulos, 23, was proud of Fakhri’s victory. “I would really hope that she would raise the Lebanese name up high,” said the Beirut native, an Arabic professor at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, before adding, “instead of always showing the terrorism part of it, maybe she could show the good side of it, the beauty.”

Arab Americans generally interpret her victory as a symbol of integration and of belonging to America, a sign that “the American dream is still alive and kicking.”

“Her victory is an inspiration for Muslims living in the United States,” Khalid Al-Khalifa, the Foreign Minister of Bahrain, exclaimed that nine years after the attacks of 9/11, America has come a long way in how it perceives Muslims, mainly affected by “a president of Muslim origin and a Muslim Miss America.”

The Arabic language news site Nawaret portrays Ms. Fakhri as the new face of Arab and Muslim minorities in the US, shifting away from the terrorist image that has prevailed for the past nine years. Many of these minorities feel that 9/11 obliterated their contribution and input in America’s daily life, confining them to a stereotyped image of national threats.

According to the news site, this is also a victory for the Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in that it reflects “the greatness of America and where opportunity is open for all to reach the summit.”

Janan Delgado expresses her relief and contentment in Alt Muslimah with the decision to crown Ms. Fakhri. “Arabs and Muslims are so routinely discriminated against, and racially profiled (notoriously at airports), that seeing that one of us gets to make it in spite of being Muslim and Arab is another welcome relief,” writes Delgado.

*“For once, we’re talking about beauty and not terror.”*

*Osama Siblani, publisher of  
The Arab-American News*

However, she deplores that the victory for Arab Muslims in America is in the context of a beauty pageant, which is setting the “bar low.” She adds that the kind of achievements that Muslim women should thrive for should go beyond being in a pageant.

Nevertheless, Ms. Fakhri maintained that her victory is proof that Arabs seek to integrate and engage with America’s culture, adding that it presents a more positive image of Arabs overall, according to the Arabic newspaper Asharq-Alawsat. While she immigrated to America as a small child, Fakhri takes pride in her dual cultural heritage.

Miss USA has been under attack by some detractors who view her as a terrorist in a bikini, reports Agence France Presse.

“Don’t let her lack of a headscarf and her donning a bikini in public fool you. Miss Michigan USA, Rima Fakhri is a Muslim activist and propagandist extraordinaire,” wrote conservative political commentator Debbie Schlusser in her blog.

“It’s a sad day in America but a very predictable one, given the politically correct, Islamo-pandering climate in which we’re mired,” wrote Schlusser, who slammed Fakhri as a “Hezbollah-supporting Shiite Muslim.”

Blogger Jonathan Turley ridiculed the accusations that Miss USA may be a mole for Hezbollah, noting that it is upsetting that “in our contemporary politics that an Arab-American cannot simply win such a pageant without unleashing such a torrent of hateful conspiracy theories.” He adds that if the Lebanese terrorist group really wanted to infiltrate America, choosing the beauty pageant as a venue would be a desperate bid.

Turley derided these speculations and concludes in a jocular manner that next time, Hezbollah “will be targeting the USA Spelling Bee.”

## 1001 Opinions over Arabian Nights

A group of Islamist lawyers in Egypt are suing the Ministry of Culture for indecency following the release of the literary classic’s recent edition, *The Arabian Nights*, reports *The Telegraph*.

The lawyers are calling for a complete ban of the book, claiming that the content incites “vice and sin.” Originally known in Arabic as *The Thousand and One Nights*, the book compiles folk tales and stories from the Middle East and South Asia, dating back to ancient and medieval Arabic literature. While some of the stories are geared towards children (such as *Aladdin* or *The Tales of Sinbad*), other are specifically written for a more mature readership.

The Islamists are appealing to Article 178 of Egypt’s penal code, which punishes “with imprisonment for a period of two years anyone who publishes literature or pictures offensive to public decency,”

reports the Arabic newspaper *Al-Riyadh*.

“I was shocked at the offensive phrases it contains,” said Ayman Abdul-Hakim, member of *Lawyers without Shackles*, the non-governmental group that filed a complaint with Egypt’s Prosecutor General. The group called for the withdrawal of the new edition from the market and for banning the book altogether.

*“The text has nothing against Islam. We are facing a group of imposters who claim they are defending Islam.”*

*Mohamed Hafez Diab,  
Professor of Sociology.*

Unlike previously bowdlerized versions, the latest edition sparked controversy by explicitly depicting sexuality. Although the lawyers claim that the material is offensive, the new edition is more faithful to the original 1825 Cairene manuscripts. The first edition sold out shortly after its publication.

A Writers’ Union spokesman accused the lawyers of behaving “like the Taliban.” *The Arabian Nights* are viewed as “an invaluable cultural heritage that cannot be confiscated,” stated the state-run General Organization of Culture Palaces (GOCP) Supreme Publication Committee, according to *Al-Arabiya*. The GOCP republished the book, arguing that while the edition may need to be revisited, it will definitely not be confiscated nor banned.

“The fact that the first edition was sold out shortly after it was issued shows that Egyptians are avid readers and that they will not be influenced by a bunch of people who take advantage of Islam in order to suppress freedom,” said Ahmed Megahed, GOCP Chairman.

*The Arabian Nights*, Sociology Professor Mohamed Hafez Diab added, should not be viewed as a work depicting obscene content, as the lawyers asserted. It is, on the contrary, a work that tackles power relations. Diab described the complaint filed with the Prosecutor General as a representation of the deteriorating literary culture in a society that takes advantage of religion.

He concluded, “The text has nothing against Islam. We are facing a group of imposters who claim they are defending Islam and are trying to make apostates of others.”

However, this is not the first time that such a case occurred in Egypt, remarks *The Economist*. Islamist Egyptians, going back to 1985, have tried to ban the bawdier editions of *The Arabian Nights*. According to Samia Mehrez, a professor at the American University in Cairo and the author of *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, this lawsuit is motivated by political designs rather than cultural ones.

“Cultural icons have been used as pawns in the political game between the state and the Islamists,” she said. “It is the Islamists’ way of getting back at the state, by embarrassing it, for the violence it inflicts on them.”

Christian groups have also been irked by a literary work. Arabic Booker prize winner Yusef Zeidan’s *Azazil*, depicts the revered Christian figure Cyril as fanatical and intolerant. Like their Islamist peers, Christian lawyers called on article 178 to ban the publication of this book.

In the meantime, *The Economist* remarks that the authorities, including the minister of culture, Farouk Hosni, have remained silent in both cases, further vexing liberal campaigners. The controversial cases are occurring amidst a spurt in the publication of Arab novels, many of which tackle controversial subjects, “partly thanks to enterprising independent publishers and to a growing Western interest in Arab literature.”

Despite the efforts by the Islamists to ban *The Arabian Nights*, writers, and so it seems the Ministry of Culture, may not compromise over a literary work that is internationally viewed as a shining symbol of Arab culture.

## Homegrown Terrorism: Keep It Local

The recent foiled terrorist attack on Time Square by Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad is sparking a debate regarding homegrown terrorism and the process of radicalization, reports Voice of America. A deluge of questions have been raised as to what led him to become radicalized and associate himself with Al-Qaeda.

Seemingly living “the American dream,” Shahzad was an immigrant who had gained US citizenship after earning two university degrees and getting a job as a financial analyst. Shahzad was, in his own words, “inspired” by Anwar Al-Awlaki, the US-born Muslim cleric currently hiding in Yemen.

Jerrold Post, the author of *Mind of the Terrorist*, explained that Al-Awlaki attempts to convince his audience that Islam is in danger, “One, [he portrays] the Muslim as a victim; Two, the necessity for defensive jihad [...] three, the person who martyrs himself for the cause has higher stature and will be rewarded in paradise.”

Analysts believe that Shahzad’s transition to extremism was gradual, with a number of contributing factors. For example, in addition to losing his home to foreclosure, the current US-led drone attacks in Pakistan caused significant casualties in areas in proximity Shahzad’s hometown in Pakistan, possibly affecting him.

Robert Wright of *The New York Times* demurs at the idea that jihadi ideology and extremism were the only incentives behind Mr. Shahzad’s attempt to bomb Time Square. He invites people to conceive “a universe in which behaviors — such as planting a bomb — don’t have a single “root” cause. In this universe, bomb-planting behavior is kind of like the bombs themselves: a number of ingredients have to come together before things get explosive.”

Wright posits that Shahzad probably felt alienated for a number of reasons. The internet provided him with access to like-minded people who provided him with a sense of belonging, something “he hadn’t found in America.” He argues that

America’s “hawkish policies” are partly responsible for creating “jihadi intent.” an issue that was also noted in the case of Fort Hood’s perpetrator Nidal Hasan.

Shuja Nawaz at the Atlantic Council noted that there is a dearth of alternative voices among Muslim communities in the US and Pakistan to counter the message of violent extremists to the likes of Al-Awlaki. He added that this “has been a failing not only of the countries like Pakistan where some of the terrorists or suspected terrorists come from, but also on the part of the US Public Diplomacy.”

Overall, analysts concur that anger and frustration among young Muslims becomes a volatile combination once the anger is channeled into political causes. Columnist William McKenzie points out for *The Dallas Morning News* that homegrown terrorism stresses the urge for winning the hearts and minds of Muslim populations in the United States.

McKenzie explains that during a conversation with former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James K. Glassman and with Vice President at the Center for a New American Security Kristin Lord, both contended that efforts can be made to establish a meaningful dialogue with Muslims in America.

However, the effort remains international in its scope and encompasses exposing the conflict within Muslim society, namely the hijacking of a religion by a tiny minority of extremists who choose violence as a discourse. McKenzie points out, “That’s an issue largely for Muslim societies to debate, but the US can help make that conversation possible,” while stressing the role that social media provides them with a platform to do so.

Rebecca N. White at *The National Interest* reports on Bruce Hoffman’s analysis, which notes that Shahzad is just the latest in a long line of terrorist threats that Washington should have anticipated. The mounting evidences pointing out that Shahzad was connected to the Taliban in Pakistan is an ominous portent that terrorists are being radicalized and deployed faster at an international level.

Hoffman concurs that public diplomacy can play a pivotal role in countering radicalization. He remarks, “Much of our

public diplomacy is aimed at traditional media, like television and radio, and elites,” leaving out the younger generations that require other outreach strategies.

Ms. White points out that American policies tend to be too reactive, leaving a vacuum for terrorists to act and convert potential recruits to their ideology, allowing for the “internal threat to fester and terror to continue.”

Diana Mukkaled posits for the Saudi newspaper *Asharq-Alawsat* that Mr. Shahzad could be the symbol of a new generation of jihadists, who are very knowledgeable on modern means of communication. Shahzad admitted to frequently downloading and listening to Al-Awlaki’s speeches on the internet, denoting the e-sheikh’s “great ability to communicate with his followers on the internet.”

“Despite his appearance and his typical Yemeni features, Al-Awlaki’s tools of communication are purely Western in terms of his expressions, his approach, and the up-to-date examples he presents when discussing a certain issue, all of which are tinted by the Al-Qaeda Islamic ideology,” purports Mukkaled, remarking on the newly-found trend of Western terrorist of Islamic origins.

Like his predecessors such as Nidal Malik Hasan, Humam al-Balawi, Umar Farouk [Abdumuttalib], Mr. Shahzad exhibits the new features of jihadists being formed via cyberspace, where the exchange of skills and information is instantly at one’s reach.

## The Sound of Music and Public Diplomacy

A statement released by the Department of State in April revealed that the Obama administration is providing funding for a music tour in the Middle East by an Egyptian-American country and pop singer, as part of its attempt to improve the United States’ relationship with the Muslim world and promote “respect for diverse cultures, faiths and traditions.”

This latest public diplomacy effort,

inspired by the President's Cairo speech, is aimed at building bridges between the two cultures through providing Middle Eastern audiences with an example of a rising American musical talent, and of America's diversity of faith and heritage.

*"I want to ...  
share my personal  
experiences  
and break some  
stereotypes and  
preconceived ideas  
about being an  
American Muslim."*

*Kareem Salama, country  
singer.*

The 32-year-old singer/songwriter, Kareem Salama, headed to Cairo on April 26th for the tour's opening performance, accompanied by three other accomplished musicians: Dan Workman, JJ Worthen and Michael Whitebread. The band is expected to be on tour for a whole month, visiting visit six other countries including Morocco, Kuwait, Bahrain, Syria, Jerusalem and Jordan.

Sending "America's first Muslim country singer" to the Middle East is regarded as yet another State Department "soft-power" initiative to improve "Washington's dented reputation across the Middle East," writes James Reinel at The National.

Art advocates believe that beneficial outcomes may result from utilizing art as a cultural diplomacy initiative. According to Vishakha Desai, the president of the New York-based Asia Society, art has the ability to "humanize and create a more nuanced understanding" of the other and could be utilized to ease tensions and facilitate communication.

Despite the new budget set aside by the State Department for such efforts, Desai believes that funding is still

lacking. "Money remains a huge issue. Even under the current administration with its tremendous interest in using arts and culture to advance public diplomacy, the truth is, there isn't enough support," she complains.

Still, Salama seems to show genuine interest in spreading the image of his homeland as an "inclusive country that welcomes newcomers" of all faiths. He maintains, "I want to learn from the people we meet, share my music, share my personal experiences and break some stereotypes and preconceived ideas about being an American Muslim," adding that introducing country music in the region, if it happens, is a secondary goal.

During the Morocco segment of the tour, the band's drummer, Mohsin Mohi-ud-Din, expressed his hope that their work would challenge the general misconception that all US Muslims suffer under "Islamophobic oppression," reports The National. He explained, "Muslims have more freedom in America than they do in most Arab nations."

In similar vein, a new Arab hip-hop movement has emerged consisting of rappers from across the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, who "have joined forces to spread their message and their music to audiences worldwide," writes Joshua Asen for Foreign Policy. Some of the artists behind this movement include Shadia Mansour, the group DAM, Lowkey and the Narcicyst.

Asen describes this Arab hip-hop revolution, which Hamas tried to shut down, as a "powerful and natural ally." He suggests that the State Department should rethink its approach to utilizing hip-hop, which "embodies both the spirit of diplomacy and that of armed resistance."

However, Asen warns that the exclusion of the Palestinian territories and Gaza on the tour by the State Department may not have seemed like the safer option, yet it comes at the expense of sacrificing the "best opportunity for real impact."

In Somalia, an 11-member rap band called Waayaha Cusub, including one female, has been exiled to Kenya because its lyrics encourage Somalis to stand up to the Islamist rebel group al Shabaab, reports Asharq Alawsat.

The group's founder, Shine Abdullahi, who has survived an assassination attempt said, "We will wipe out the fear of our people that no one can speak out against [Somali Islamist insurgent group] Al-Shabaab... They misread our religion and kill people."

Abdullahi remains optimistic that the band's work may contribute to rid the country of the insurgent group. "This is real war. Those who refuse to honor their prophet cannot win," he said.

## Arabic Domain Names: A New Gateway to the Internet

The Arab world recently took a step closer to obtaining universal internet access when Arabic script domain names became available, reports ABC News. Previously, website URLs could only use Latin alphabetical characters.

In the Middle East, the move was hailed as "a milestone in internet history," broadening internet access to a wired society, continues ABC News. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two of the wealthiest countries in the region, and Egypt, strongly endorsed the new domain names.

The Arabic script domain names "will boost the number of online users in [Egypt]...and eliminate language barriers," Egyptian Minister of Communications Tarek Kamel declared, according to Bright Side of News.

Rod Beckstrom, president and CEO of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which oversees URL registration, praised the move as a positive step for the Arab world. "The ongoing transition to languages that use alphabets other than Latin-based ones will make the internet more accessible to millions around the globe," Beckstrom said.

But some commentators are skeptical that the Arabic script will actually be beneficial to the Arab world, or that it will be adopted to any great degree.

“Virtually any Arabic speaker who uses the web has already adjusted to [encoding glitches and the lack of a standard Arabic keyboard] in his or her own way,” writes Sinan Antoon in an opinion piece for The New York Times. “Arabic internet users have found a way to adjust.”

While Antoon cites the Madar Research Group report, which states that the Arabization of URLs will trigger a 50 percent growth of internet users over the next three years, he remarks that the idea of an Arabic web remains misleading.

The number of new web users will progressively decrease as the digital divide, closely linked to political and material factors, remains the main obstacle to a sustainable increase in internet development and increase in international internet users.

Others remark that Arabic URLs may deepen the divide between Arabic speakers and the rest of the world.

*“Citizen journalism is a popular coup d’etat against traditional journalism.”*

*Ali Al-Karni, Media Professor at King Saud University.*

“It feels like it’s going to isolate the Arabic web rather than facilitate it,” online personality Baher Al-Hakim told ABC News. “It will be nearly impossible for English speakers to access those websites [with Arabic domain names].”

ICANN stated that the group intends to develop Cyrillic, Chinese, and Japanese scripts in the coming years, despite growing concerns that the expansion into non-Latin characters will open more opportunities for ill-intentioned users, says The Jordan Times.

“The extended character codes required

to cover such a large number of alphabets could increase the level of web threats of all kinds: phishing, data theft and hacking,” the article speculates.

“We should all celebrate the diversity that comes with an internet no longer tied to a single alphabet,” Sinan Antoon writes. “But we should be realistic, too...An Arabic web is not about to spur an internet revolution.”

## Arab Media Forum Tackles Censorship

The ninth annual Arab Media Forum took place in Dubai in May and focused on the advances in print and electronic publications and the role of censorship, according to Allan Jacob at The Khaleej Times. Jacob points out that while internet publications are thriving, print media continues to bloom with increased readership.

Despite the current economic downturn, Arab media may be the only sector with a positive outlook. Although advertising has reached a nadir, local advertising companies may come to a beneficial deal with Arab media, keeping both industries afloat.

According to a report by Arab Media Outlook entitled “A Close Look at Arab Media 2009-2013”, 90 percent of Arabic content is derived from original content written in Arabic and 10 per cent comes from programs derived from translated content, adding that print media benefits the most from advertising revenues.

Media experts attending the Forum argued that sponsors and advertisers generally call the shots in the Arab media, leading to declining standards, according to The Khaleej Times.

Experts regard Arabic content as a challenge while there is a wide consensus on the profound link between the quantity of Arabic content and any media’s ability to generate advertisement revenue. “Arabic content is a real challenge, without which media will fail to generate advertisement revenue,” said the official head of Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) Osama Al-Sheikh.

Local content for television stations is heavily influenced by advertisers’ patronage. Despite vehement complaints about the lack of creativity and repetitiveness that is widespread in Arab media, television stations are not supporting new ideas, according to Mohammed Hareb, Director and Producer of Lammtara Pictures and creator of the popular 3D cartoon series, reports Eye of Dubai.

The Khaleej Times quotes Sheikh on the importance of quality. “We should not be proud of having more than 600 satellite channels; [...] the content is very weak, underdeveloped, repetitive, bossy, and vulnerable for invasion from foreign media.”

Indicating funding as the biggest challenge, Saif Al-Eslam bin Sauod bin Abdulaziz, media writer and researcher, concurred that government support is essential to enhancing the quality of local production. “Bureaucracy, censorship, and governmental control must come to an end,” he said.

Advertising spending in the region is expected to increase at an annual growth rate of eight percent between 2009 and 2013. Magda Abu Fadil for The Huffington Post stresses the importance of electronic media and calls citizen journalism and e-media the “fifth estate of journalism.”

Media professor Ali Al-Karni of Saudi Arabia’s King Saud University zapped co-panelist Egyptian editor Anwar Al-Hawari, who claimed that citizen journalism was dead, triggering a slew of comments on how traditionalists like him were history and had a superficial understanding of “new media.”

“It’s important to promote spontaneity,” Al-Karni insisted, adding that reporters were armed with basic journalistic guidelines to ensure accuracy and balance. In the United Arab Emirates, collaboration between telecoms and new media is flourishing, leading to a creative model emerging from the Middle East region, another participant pointed out.

More importantly, panelists discussed censorship at length throughout the Forum, discussing whether satellite channels would fall prey to more broadcast restrictions, reports Gulf News. Specialists concurred that

censorship is a practice that needs to be removed from Arab media.

In February 2008, Arab media ministers approved a resolution regulating satellite broadcasting. The resolution stipulated that broadcasters must refrain from provoking violence, hatred, terrorism and criticizing Arab leaders and religious or national icons. The law also recommended the imposition of penalty and/or punishment for non-compliance of rules.

“We are in an age of technological, social and political development that doesn’t allow for these outdated practices to be effective,” said Khalid Al-Naciri, the Moroccan Minister of Communication. He added that media personnel and journalists must abide by a code of ethics.

Arab ministers of information and the Arab League have been toying with the charter to control what they consider unruly channels promoting promiscuity and hate speech. However, critics view official measures to curb the 500-plus satellite broadcasters as attempts to silence political rivals and muffle free speech, remarks Magda Abu Fadil for The Huffington Post.

Furthermore, on December 8, 2009, 395 members of the US Congress agreed on a law that qualifies owners of some pan-Arab satellite channels as supporters of terrorist organizations promoting violence, calling for punitive measures. Many Arab channels viewed this latest law as a serious blow to the freedom of speech.

## State Heads on a Cultural Tour

On May 1, 35 embassies opened their doors to share their nations’ culture and customs in Washington, DC as a part of Cultural Tourism DC’s annual Around the World open house tour, reports The Washington Informer.

Visitors toured the embassies, sampled regional cuisine, learned about history and culture and viewed artwork from countries such as Japan, Haiti, Rwanda and Croatia. “We call this cultural diplomacy,” said Pat Wheeler, marketing

director for Cultural Tourism DC.

“It’s hard to be hateful or be suspicious of a people if you get to know about their country,” she added. “The countries who participate in the event are promoting tourism, business opportunities and just reaching out a hand for friendship.”

Linda Harper, executive director of Cultural Tourism DC, stated that the program “strengthens those connections by providing opportunities to interact with people from around the world – and by starting a global conversation that fosters curiosity about other places.”

However, some experts remain skeptical about the effectiveness of US public diplomacy efforts.

Patricia H. Kushlis at Whirled View promotes a hands-on approach to training State Department officers for public diplomacy. “Just as a State Department economics officer, for instance, needs both the theoretical knowledge of economics and practice working under a more experienced economics officer to learn the trade as practiced in the State Department, the same needs to go for public diplomacy,” she maintains.

Although she applauds increased resources for public diplomacy projects like Cultural Tourism DC’s Around the World tour, Kushlis fears that State’s bureaucracy is too rigid to enable a dramatic overhaul of public diplomacy in the United States.

Kushlis promotes the use of experiential learning for junior-level diplomacy officers. “Experiential or informal learning is what America’s public diplomacy too often lacks,” she claims.

Although the learning process is important, Kushlis concludes that public diplomacy efforts require a “strong backbone in Washington to help – not hinder – the learning process along.” She remains skeptical of the effectiveness of Judith McHale’s public diplomacy roadmap.

Former Assistant Secretary of State for Resource Management Bradford Higgins writes at The Christian Science Monitor that public diplomacy efforts are crucial for a victory in Iraq and the greater struggle against terrorism worldwide. “In its purest form, the war on terror is a war over ideas and values,” he argues.

Higgins, goes on to point out that the US engaged in educational and cultural programs throughout the Cold War. “Now such educational exchange programs seem to be almost nonexistent compared with the level of US military funding,” Higgins observes.

Higgins supports the use of cultural diplomacy to secure a victory in Iraq, suggesting a concentrated effort for Iraqi women. In particular, Higgins cites the promising Iraqi Women’s Fellowship Foundation scholarship program.

“As the Obama administration develops its plans for supporting the transition to Iraqi self-reliance – and fights another war in Afghanistan, in part to establish and protect the rights of women there – it must not forget the role of education exchanges,” Bradford Higgins asserts.

“Washington should also keep in mind the courage of Iraq’s women and the foundational role that they can play in establishing a stable, just, and democratic Iraq,” he concludes.

## Capitalizing on Business Opportunities in the Middle East

Last month’s Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship marked an auspicious turn-of-events in US-Muslim relations, reports Amy Wilkinson for CNN.

President Obama invited 275 entrepreneurs from more than 50 Muslim-majority countries to attend the summit. Although Muslim US citizens were not directly invited to participate at the summit, the international attendees exchanged ideas and gained access to valuable business contacts and investment opportunities.

The creation of national business groups is vital in a globalized economy, writes Fabienne Lucas for Business 24/7. Lucas defines a “business group” as representative of the national business community, and “creating and providing information,

knowledge and networks for companies and individuals from a shared culture, which helps build collective confidence and provides support that translates relationships into commercial success.”

These business groups, Lucas continues, “provide a ready-made network of useful business contacts for companies entering a market for the first time.” She points out that the demand for a business group is high in the “dynamic” United Arab Emirates, likening the UAE to the “United Nations’ of business.”

But Amy Wilkinson states that although the Obama administration held the conference to send a political message of “collaborative agreement,” the delegates actually focused on expanding their own businesses.

“[Obama] has advanced the culture of entrepreneurship to an inflection point,” commented Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core.

According to Wilkinson, the summit initiated the launch of other initiatives. First, the Presidential Summit itself will be moving to the Middle Eastern region. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan claimed that his nation would host the 2011 Summit.

Additionally, President Obama announced plans to launch entrepreneurial exchange programs. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also introduced four initiatives: the Global Entrepreneurship Program, Silicon Valley partnerships, Partners for a New Beginning, and e-Mentor Corps.

Fabienne Lucas identifies the Gulf as an ideal location for international business initiatives. “We see the convergence on Dubai of global business -- and with notably different styles of doing business, from the West and East.”

The summit may also represent a shift in the position of women in Middle Eastern societies. According to Amelia Timbers at Triplepundit, a panel of women spoke about the value of female entrepreneurship at the Presidential Summit.

Timbers also cites studies demonstrating that the inclusion of women in the workplace increases revenue, and female fund managers generally outperform their male counterparts.

After the summit, Clinton announced initiatives specifically targeting women in the Middle East, such as a partnership called the ‘Secretary’s International Fund for Women and Girls,’ according to Agence France Presse.

The International Fund, a public-private partnership, will present grants to non-government organizations which help women make economic, social, and political progress. “We will soon launch our second program in Indonesia, and we plan to expand to a dozen countries within the next two years,” stated Clinton.

Amelia Timbers supports both external efforts but also encourages women to pursue opportunities aggressively. “Getting women into positions of business leadership does require men that recognize discrimination as a real, common and unjustified barrier to entry. But more importantly, it requires women who foster leadership in themselves and in culture, who recognize their own value and communicate it, and who do not shy away from capital,” she concludes

## Media Exchange Programs Opens New Doors

On World Press Freedom Day, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy Bruce Wharton spoke about the power of online media, reports Radio VOP.

“Online journalism is big, it’s growing fast, growing in power, it’s messy and it looks a whole lot to me like real participatory democracy,” said Wharton.

The impact and potential of the internet and social media has been a focus at international conferences and student exchange programs. For example, the Independent Television Services announced a collaboration with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), reports Article Ant.

The two groups will collaborate to host a leadership summit called “Seizing the Moment” at the Newseum in Washington, DC. CEOs, media leaders, and policy experts will discuss the role of

media in conflict-resolution. Among the panelists are Al-Jazeera English’s Senior News Anchor Riz Khan and GeoTV Pakistan’s CEO Mir Ibrahim Rahman.

Sheldon Himelfarb, USIP’s Executive Director for the Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding, asked, “Can we seize this moment to make media a more potent force for peacebuilding in the world?”

“We’ve assembled an extraordinary group of policy makers and media makers to ask this vital question, and to consider a set of recommendations developed by experts that would make international conflict management a core tenet of US public diplomacy,” he continued.

“Social media has provided a new generation of opinion leaders with the means to express their views and reach out to a larger audience -- instantaneously. Everyone with access to the internet has potential political power,” maintains Javeria Rizvi Kabani at The Local.

Kabani, the program manager of the Swedish Institute’s Young Leaders Visitors Program (YLVP), is a proponent of democracy in the Middle East. “We do not need to support democracy; instead we need to support people who are democratic forces,” she asserts.

*“We do not need to support democracy; instead we need to support people who are democratic forces.”*

*Javeria Rizvi Kabani,  
Program Manager of the  
Swedish Institute’s YLVP.*

On May 10, leaders from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region traveled to Sweden to participate in the YLVP. The program provided training, equipping the leaders to

promote freedom of expression and social change in their respective societies.

“Young men and women are risking their lives to get the free word out to the world,” Kabani states, highlighting the importance of training leaders for this specific mission.

Another student exchange brought American students to the Middle East. In March, students from the Masters in Public Diplomacy Program at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism participated in a conference in Dubai, writes John Nahas for The Rockower Post.

The group visited the offices of the English-language news channel The National, as well as the offices of the MBC group and Al-Arabiya. The students observed various panels with media figures and journalists and discussed the importance of Arab media.

“Overall, the MPD students got to observe the growing importance of Arab media as an international broadcasting actor and its role in local and international affairs in the region,” observes Nahas.

“Building respectful relationships with the Middle East continues to be important, and while cultural barriers and common misconceptions still exist, social media tools provide great opportunities to create and enhance respectful and long-lasting relationships,” concludes Javeria Rizvi Kabani.

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