

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



Layalina Productions Inc., 1250 24th Street NW, Suite 300 Washington, DC 20037

Vol.VI No. 17 August 13-August 26, 2010

A Divisive Dialogue over the Cordoba House

The Cordoba House, a proposed Islamic cultural center that would be located near Ground Zero, continues to generate controversy and anger across America, reports William Dalrymple of The New York Times. He remarks that while President Barack Obama himself originally endorsed the project in the name of freedom of religion in America, he eventually stated that his comments were taken out of context.

"I believe that Muslims have the right to practice their religions as everyone else in this county, and that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan in accordance with local laws and ordinances," Obama declared to a crowd of Muslims invited to the White House State Dining Room for an iftar dinner, a meal where Muslims break their day-long fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

The following day, he clarified his position on the matter, "I was not commenting and I will not comment on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there... I was commenting very specifically on the right people have that dates back to our founding."

The New York Times describes the reaction of some groups as a contradiction to their very own ideals, such as the "Anti-Defamation League, an organization dedicated to ending 'unjust and unfair discrimination,'" that is now seeking "to discriminate against American Muslims." Dalrymple comments that series of high officials and politicians depicted the Cordoba Initiative, the organization behind the project, as "deliberately insulting."

Dalrymple explains that these attacks

indicate a lack of understanding regarding the complexities of the Muslim world and "a failure that hugely hampers Western efforts to fight violent Islamic extremism and to reconcile Americans with peaceful adherents of the world's second-largest religion."

Dalrymple argues that Feisal Abdul Rauf of the Cordoba Initiative, one of America's leading authorities on Sufism, the mystical form of Islam, is the antithesis of militant Islam promoted by Al-Qaeda.

Citing a 2007 study by the RAND Corporation, Dalrymple adds that someone like Abdul Rauf should be considered a vital ally rather than an enemy as, according to the study, the "Sufis' open, intellectual interpretation of Islam makes them ideal partners in the effort to combat Islamist extremism."

However, controversy surrounding the wrongly-named "Ground Zero Mosque" continues to roil, both domestically and worldwide, remarks Tom A. Peter for The Christian Science Monitor. Spilling over into political discourse and dominating the news, the debate is also fostering some divides among Muslims.

According to Arab News, Gamal Abd Al-Gawad, director of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo prompted, "Many Muslims fear that the mosque will become a shrine for Islamists, which would remind Americans of what Muslims did on 9/11." Al-Gawad further commented that the controversy surrounding the mosque could reinforce prejudice against Muslims and Islam in the United States.

Middle East News Sources added that Muslims are actually distancing themselves from the project, as Arabs and Muslims remain skeptical about the initiative to build the mosque. "The Americans [are] running the show, i.e. the right wing and the lobbies are viewed by Arab and Muslim public opinion as biased against Islam in general," commented

Samir Al-Saadawi, editor of foreign affairs for the Arab daily Al-Hayat.

Shakib Bin-Makhlouf, president of the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe argued, "Islam has nothing to do with the events that happened on 9/11," before adding, "Unfortunately, the media has contributed in tying terrorism to Islam. When a non-Muslim commits an act of terror, no-one refers to his religion."

As the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque" has turned into a political debating ground, it is also perceived a "barometer for the world to assess how America treats Muslims," notes Peter for The Christian Science Monitor.

Republican Congressional candidates intensified efforts to widen the divide over construction of an Islamic center near Ground Zero into the midterm campaigns, while the Senate's top Democrat, Sen Harry Reid of Nevada, said he objected to the mosque being built at the site, commented Carl Hulse for The

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New York Times.

“The First Amendment protects freedom of religion,” said Jim Manley, one of Reid’s top advisers. “Senator Reid respects that but thinks that the mosque should be built someplace else.” “Ground Zero is hallowed ground to Americans,” said Elliott Maynard, a Republican politician. Maynard, who is trying to unseat Representative Nick J. Rahall II, a Democrat, in West Virginia’s Third District, also said, “Do you think the Muslims would allow a Jewish temple or Christian church to be built in Mecca?”

“The issue of constitutional rights is secondary.”

Richard Bulliet, Professor of History at Columbia University

One British blogger suggested that the mosque is evidence that America is experiencing the same “Islamicization” allegedly occurring in Europe, where many worry that Muslims are gaining undue influence.

HDS Greenway for the GlobalPost, points out that the controversy has turned into a matter of foreign policy. Noting that it strengthens the argument expressed by extremists such as Osama Bin Laden, Greenway stated, “It is a controversy that can do irreparable harm to United States foreign policy and its struggle against Islamic extremism. For it punctures the image the United States [...] is a place where Muslims can freely worship and co-exist with other religions in peace and harmony; that Islam can coexist with modernity and tolerance.”

At the present moment, many Americans are upset with Muslims who may appear “insensitive to American feelings associated” with 9/11, notes Richard Bulliet, professor of History at Columbia University, for Middle East Online. “The issue of constitutional rights is secondary,” he notes.

Drawing a comparison with the Danish cartoons that enraged Muslims worldwide, Bulliet comments that a minority of Americans, led by President Obama and Mayor Bloomberg, feel that freedom of religion takes precedence over any issue of sensitivity.

No religious or national group is immune to feelings of outrage over actions they interpret as blasphemous or patently wrong. The sensibilities of Muslims are no more fragile than those of Americans, nor are Muslims more intemperate in expressing their anger than Americans.

New York Governor David Paterson plans to discuss relocating a proposed Muslim cultural centre and mosque to a less emotionally charged location farther away from New York City’s ‘Ground Zero’ site of the September 11 attacks, according to Gulf Times.

“If everyone steps back and looks at this, it really is in everyone’s best interest in doing it ... especially the Muslim community, to show that they are serious about building bridges and that they are not just trying to make a statement by having a mosque built over Ground Zero,” said US Representative Peter King of New York.

Close to 60 percent of Americans oppose the plan, reports Gulf Times, although supporters say having the Islamic cultural center provides an opportunity to promote understanding of the religion and begin the healing process nearly a decade after the attacks. As originally envisioned, the building will not feature a minaret, dome or any other architectural motif typically associated with mosques.

Al-Arabiya Director Rejects Ground Zero Mosque

Abdul Rahman Al-Rashid, general manager of Al-Arabiya, underlined his opposition to the building of the mosque near Ground Zero in Asharq-Alawsat. “This is because the mosque is not an issue for Muslims, and they have not heard of it until the shouting became loud between the supporters and the objectors, which is mostly an argument between non-Muslim US citizens!” he argues.

Al-Rashid explains that the community center in New York would become “an arena for promoters of hatred, and a symbol of those who committed the crime.” He points out that Muslims do not actually need to have place of worship in a commercial city district.

As for the mosque’s supporters, Al-Rashid questions whether the building applicant is a man who wants a mosque aiming for reconciliation or whether he is an investor who simply wants quick profits. He adds, “The last thing Muslims want today is to build just a religious center out of defiance to others, or a symbolic mosque that people visit as a museum next to a cemetery.”

“The last thing Muslims want today is to build just a religious center out of defiance to the others.”

Abdul Rahman Al-Rashid, General Manager of Al-Arabiya

Al-Rashid points out that Americans fail to understand that the battle against terrorism is not theirs to fight, but rather it is a struggle for Muslims attempting to reclaim Islam from extremists in more than twenty countries. Some may fear that building a mosque near Ground Zero may crystallize this notion forever. Al-Rashid expresses his doubts that Muslims would want to see the site become “a shrine for Islam haters whose aim is to turn the public opinion against Islam.” He fears that this process has already started.

In fact, Al-Rashid believes that the media are missing the point about Muslim desires and aspirations, as Eileen Toplansky for American Thinker reports the general manager of Al-Arabiya stating

“Muslims are [more] concerned about issues that involve the destinies of [entire] peoples...such as the establishment of the Palestinian state.”

Toplansky also disagrees with Al-Rashid's comments that terrorism is solely an intra-faith battle. She asserts that it is in fact an American battle in which the nation must identify “the enemy” in order to defeat it. She also questions whether the “forces within the Muslim world who truly want to destroy the jihadist terrorists” are a significant enough presence to take on the battle.

Toplansky identifies Al-Rashid as a voice of reason when he stated that Muslims do not want “to build a monument or a place of worship that tomorrow may become a source of pride for the terrorists and their Muslim followers, nor do they want a mosque that will become a shrine for the haters of Islam.”

American Muslims who support the proposed mosque and Islamic center near ground zero are facing skeptics within their own faith — those who argue that the project is insensitive to Sept. 11 victims and needlessly provocative at a time when Muslims are pressing for wider acceptance in the US, reports the Associated Press.

“For most Americans, 9/11 remains as an open wound, and anything associated with Islam, even for Americans who want to understand Islam — to have an Islamic center with so much publicity is like rubbing salt in open wounds,” remarks Akbar Ahmed, professor of Islamic studies at American University, a former Pakistani ambassador to Britain and author of “Journey Into America, The Challenge of Islam.”

“Winning in the court of law is not going to help improve the image of Muslims nationwide,” said Asmal, a Massachusetts physician. “You have to win the hearts and minds of the ordinary American people.” Few American Muslims who lost relatives in the terrorist strikes have spoken out, but those who have are also divided, according to the Associated Press.

Talat Hamdani, a Muslim whose son Salman, a New York police cadet and emergency medical technician, was killed on Sept. 11, supports the proposal. “I’m not fighting for a mosque. I’m fighting for

my rights,” she said. By contrast, Neda Bolourchi of Los Angeles, a native of Iran whose mother was on one of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center, opposes the plan.

Expressing her fear that it may cultivate a fundamentalist version of the faith, Bolourchi wrote in an op-ed for The Washington Post, “To the supporters of this new Islamic cultural center, I must ask: Build your ideological monument somewhere else, far from my mother’s grave, and let her rest.”

An Abu Ghraib Deja-Vu for Israeli Soldier on Facebook

Israeli and Palestinian officials were outraged after Eden Abergil, a former Israeli soldier, posted pictures of herself with blindfolded and handcuffed Palestinian prisoners on Facebook, reports Middle East Online. In a radio interview, Abergil could not understand why her pictures, taken at an unspecified location near the Gaza Strip and posted on the social networking site, generated such uproar.

The photographs uploaded by Abergil from Ashdod and labeled “IDF – the best time of my life,” depicted her smiling next to Palestinian prisoners. Because Abergil was discharged a year ago, the Israeli army has no power to prevent her from publicizing the photographs.

One photo shows Eden Abergil crouching in front of three seated detainees — one with white hair, another with a greying beard and a skullcap and a third, a younger man with black hair who is hanging his head. Another shows her sitting close to the younger man, twisting her head towards him.

While the pictures drew sharp criticism from the Israeli army, the Palestinian Authority described it as an example illustrating how the occupation corrupts Israeli minds. “This shows the mentality of the occupier, to be proud of humiliating Palestinians,” according to a statement from the office of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

A puzzled Abergil replied to what

she perceived as harsh criticism, asking, “What’s wrong with that? I don’t understand.” Bemused by the reactions it provoked, she also added, “I was photographed innocently, naively, without any political significance. There was no violence — it was just about the good experience of being in the army, that’s all.”

Ever since the story became public, access to Abergil’s Facebook page has been blocked. However, a number of Israeli bloggers took a screen grab of the comments underneath the two pictures before access was restricted

The incident was denounced by the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel (PCATI), a local rights group, which said the incident demonstrated an attitude commonplace in the military. “This reflects an attitude which has become the norm and consists in treating Palestinians like objects, not like human beings,” said PCATI head Yishai Menuchin. Other human rights activists commented that taking “souvenir pictures” is a widespread practice within the Israeli military.

Indeed, the sentiment is echoed by the British newspaper The Guardian, which featured a series of pictures similar to Abergil’s photos, demonstrating that this type of behavior seems to be the norm. Breaking the Silence, a veterans’ group, has released a number of soldiers’ pictures. Although the time and location of the events in the pictures are uncertain, they show soldiers posing with prisoners and the bodies of dead Palestinians. Apart from Eden Abergil’s face, the the soldiers’ faces were obscured in released photographs.

Andrew Wander of Al-Jazeera concurs and adds that other human rights groups claimed that Israeli soldiers routinely take degrading photographs of dead and captured Palestinians and post them on the internet, belying the claims by the Israeli army that Abergil was an isolated case.

Abergil declined a interviews by numerous bloggers and later refused to discuss the matter with Lisa Goldman, an Israeli-Canadian blogger, telling her: “I don’t speak to leftists.”

Meanwhile, Israeli human rights group B’tselem said that testimony from

Palestinians corroborates anecdotal evidence that such pictures are not unusual, reports Wander. Michelle Bubis, a spokesperson for B'tselem, told Al-Jazeera that the emergence of the new photographs suggests that these "are not isolated incidents."

"Regarding the pictures published, B'tselem cannot corroborate the precise incidents in which they took place, but reiterates that they are a clear violation of detainees' right to dignity and an abuse of power by soldiers," she said.

"This reflects an attitude which has become the norm and consists in treating Palestinians like objects, not like human beings."

Yisbai Menuchin, Director of PCATI

The Jerusalem Post also reports the position of Breaking the Silence, which corroborates other coverage claiming that Abergil's behavior is the norm and not an exception, contrary to IDF spokesman Avi Benayahu's statement on the matter.

Commentators criticized Breaking the Silence for posting photos that seem to be part of soldiers' everyday routine, for example, one of a soldier loading a blindfolded Palestinian man onto an ambulance. In response, the organization wrote: "We do not need particularly violent pictures in order to reveal the apathy and passive violence. Even in this picture, where the unit decided to take care of an injured man...we see the norm of taking a picture with the spoils. We are fighting this norm."

Middle East Online explains that social networking websites and video sharing

technology have increasingly been used as a way of exposing incidents where soldiers, police or Jewish settlers have humiliated Palestinians, or in some cases even abused them. Last year, Israeli border guards came under fire after posting clips on YouTube showing guards humiliating Palestinians. And two years earlier, a Palestinian from Hebron posted videos online showing Jewish settlers attacking and abusing Palestinians in the southern West Bank city.

In an effort to prevent similar incidents, the Israeli military has implemented strict rules regarding information that soldiers can upload to the internet, adds Wander for Al-Jazeera.

Referring to the possibility that the pictures could damage Israel's image, reports Haaretz, Eden Abergil replied, "We will always be attacked." Overall, the Arab press was outraged by the pictures, reports YNet News. Some Syrian websites posted the pictures under the heading: "An expression of the sadist culture of the occupation army: An Israeli soldier takes pleasure in the torture of Palestinians on Facebook."

Lebanese publication As-Safir reported, "The derision and oppression of Palestinians has become a new show-off material by the occupation's soldiers social networking sites." The Arabic-language version of Al-Jazeera compared the Israeli army's treatment of Palestinians to the infamous Iraqi detention center Abu-Ghraib, where numerous violations were committed against detainees.

Public Diplomacy Begins with Charity

As President Barack Obama's administration continues to expand the aid package for flood-struck Pakistan, which represents the largest humanitarian response from any country, officials acknowledge that they are seeking to use the efforts to burnish the United States' image there, reports STL Today.

White House senior officials are coordinating the aid efforts with other agencies as part of their strategy to improve long-term relations with Pakistan. Currently, resentment towards

the US is quite strong among Pakistanis, who blame US drones for a devastating series of insurgent attacks in Pakistan.

According to a poll conducted last month by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, 68 percent of Pakistanis had an unfavorable view of the United States. US officials hope that images of Navy and Marine Corps helicopters ferrying supplies and plucking people from rain-swollen rivers will at least begin to counteract the bad image of the United States, in part generated by American drone strikes against militants in Pakistan.

Richard C. Holbrooke, the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, stated on the PBS program The Charlie Rose Show that "the people of Pakistan will see that when the crisis hits, it's not the Chinese. It's not the Iranians. It's not other countries. It's not the EU. It's the US that always leads."

"The UN must explain to donor states that the money is not going to go to the hands of the Taliban."

Melanie Brooks, Spokeswoman of Care International

The flooding, which affected a fifth of the country and killed at least 1,500 people, according to the Pakistani government, has led to a sizable and rapid American response, including 76 million dollars in donations.

Some experts on the region recently warned that public resentment of the government, generated by the institution's slow and chaotic response to the floods, could wear away public support for the military campaign against militants, which are integral to American goals in the region. The concerns only deepened as hard-line Islamist charities rushed to

fill the void in humanitarian aid. Similar efforts by Islamists after an earthquake in Kashmir in 2005 helped them lure new recruits through the charities, which act as fronts for the militants.

Some of the aid has been channeled through Pakistani and international groups because the government did not want to be associated with the unpopular Americans. American officials warned that without long-term development programs, the short-term effects of the earthquake assistance would fade quickly.

John K. Wood, a retired Army colonel who was senior director for Afghanistan on the National Security Council Under presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama explains that while PR value of food assistance is indeed essential, “absent other high-profile public diplomacy efforts,” will only have an ephemeral impact.

According to Hindustan Times, the United Nations has declared that Pakistan’s image, dented due to the utilization of international funds, may hinder the process of organizing funds to help people face the floods.

The UN has been struggling to obtain 460 million dollars to provide emergency aid to the flood’s six million victims, and the donor countries fear that the aid being flown into Pakistan may end up in the hands of the Taliban.

“The UN must explain to donor states that the money is not going to go to the hands of the Taliban. The victims are the mothers, the farmers, children,” said Melanie Brooks, spokeswoman of the humanitarian group, Care International.

In the meantime, while the Chinooks are carrying out their humanitarian mission, “the drones are also raining death on Pakistani civilians, a colossal problem to improve US image in the country,” reports Rupee News. These events discredit US aid to Pakistanis, according to the news site.

Mark Levine of Al-Jazeera recommends that in the current context, the Administration could do much more in Pakistan. He suggests that Obama should immediately declare “a ceasefire in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, offer a truce to the Taliban, and pledge to put the

full weight of the tens of thousands of soldiers currently in theatre, and the huge supply of military aircraft and equipment at their disposal, to the relief efforts in Pakistan.”

Levine points out that Pakistanis and Afghans would be much more supportive of US efforts to combat Al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups if America could secure a stable economic environment rather than carry out military offensives that result in the deaths of civilians.

“Such a strategy has a chance of working where the current one of bombs and aid to the government has met with failure,” Levine adds, before concluding, “If we do not step up to fill the void, it is pretty clear who will, and what that will mean for Pakistan’s future and for ours.”

Drawdown from Iraq Affecting US Image

State Department spokesman Philip Crowley described the end of combat operations in Iraq as a “historic moment” and vowed that America would be unwavering in its long-term commitment, reports Agence France Presse. “We’re not ending our involvement in Iraq. We will have important work to do,” he added “This is a transition. This is not the end of something. It’s a transition to something different. We have a long-term commitment to Iraq.”

Michael R. Gordon for The New York Times reports that the Obama administration is “planning a remarkable civilian effort, buttressed by a small army of contractors, to fill the void” left by the removal of US combat troops. The State Department, through the use of contractors, will assume responsibility for training the Iraqi police force by October 11.

“With no American soldiers to defuse sectarian tensions in northern Iraq, it will be up to American diplomats in two new \$100 million outposts to head off potential confrontations between the Iraqi Army and Kurdish peshmerga forces,” Gordon points out.

Ernesto Londoño for The Washington Post suggests that the Iraq war will continue to be an issue for the United States. “There might never be an acknowledged end to the Iraq war – a moment where it ceases being America’s conflict,” he comments. However, he points out, “US commanders also seem to be stressing that this is no longer America’s war to lose.”

“Will the pullout improve America’s image abroad, particularly in the Middle East?” asks

Nicholas Cull, chair of the Master’s Program in Public Diplomacy at the USC Annenberg School in an article for Politics and Society, a USC publication. Comparing the withdrawal from Iraq with the 1973 troop withdrawal from Vietnam, Cull notes, “Of course, the long-term effect on world opinion hinges on what happens next in Iraq,” before adding, “If the country falls apart immediately, it will hardly reflect well on the United States.

Revealing a certain level of skepticism about Iraq’s long-term prospects, Gen. David Petraeus said “the final chapter for Iraq is certainly still to be written, reports Politico. He pressed on the importance of the formation of a new government, which has been held up by inter party squabbling since the elections that took place in March of 2010, an “immediate, pressing issue.”

In his view, a power-sharing agreement will be pivotal to Iraq’s stability. In Iraq, a mood of deep apprehension tinged with bitterness took hold among Iraqis as the American troops, whom they once feared would stay forever, are in fact going home, reports the Los Angeles Times. As Iraq is in the throes of a deep political crisis which may take a violent turn, national unease is growing

“I’m not happy at all. I’m worried. They’re leaving really early,” said Wissam Sabah, a carpet seller in one of Baghdad’s shopping districts. “We don’t have a government and we don’t know what is going to happen next. Maybe we will go back to civil war.

Many Iraqis worry that the troop reduction comes too early, while believing that the Americans are bailing out of Iraq, leaving Iraqis to their own fate. “Some people think it’s a run-out. An irresponsible withdrawal,” Kurdish

legislator Mahmoud Othman said, echoing Obama's pledge to bring about a "responsible withdrawal" of US troops. "This is about what's going on in America, not about what's going on on the ground."

"The final chapter for Iraq is certainly still to be written."

*General David Petraeus,
Commander of ISAF and
USFOR-A*

A group of Iraqi soldiers standing guard beside their US-supplied Humvee on a major Baghdad street didn't seem so sure.

One of the soldiers, when asked whether he thought security would deteriorate without US combat forces, replied, "Of course, because we have no government." The soldier, who wished to remain anonymous, made it clear he wasn't happy to see the Americans leave the country.

James Zogby, President of the Arab American Institute, explains for The Huffington Post that the war in Iraq "has been a calamity on too many levels," with the withdrawal far from being a success or an accomplishment in itself.

"From the beginning, President Obama has said that he was committed to a responsible departure from Iraq. Now we are leaving, as we must, but we have continuing responsibilities to the people of Iraq," he comments, maintaining that the United States should remain committed to Iraq "Bush and company may have started this mess, but America still owns it. We are part of Iraq's history and must recognize that reality," concludes Zogby.

Sectarian Series Pulled from the Airwaves

Two Lebanese channels, Hezbollah's Al-Manar and NBN, owned by the speaker of the Parliament Nahi Berry, canceled

an Iranian-produced television series depicting the life of Jesus following protests by Lebanese Christian groups, reports The Associated Press. NBN is affiliated with the leader of the Amal movement in Lebanon.

According to the Malaysian national news agency Bernama, the controversial 17-episode program described the Qur'anic version of the story of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus is a revered prophet in Islam, the Qur'an claims that Jesus ascended to heaven while he was still alive. Muslims differ from Christians on the topic of the influential prophet, as Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God.

The television series is based on "The Messiah," a film directed by Iranian filmmaker Nader Talebzadeh. The film received an award from the Vatican, heralded for promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Christians across Lebanon protested against the airing of the series, offended at the content. Eman El-Ahmar for The Daily Star explains that protesters gathered at the Catholic Media Center in Jal Al-Dib in the Metn district on August 13. Maronite Bishop Beshara Rai held a news conference, which turned into a heated debate. The argument took a turn for the worst despite the channels announcement to stop airing the series, when members of different Christian sects began arguing about who had "defended Jesus" more fervently.

Rai met with Beirut MP Nadim Gemayel, with Information Minister Tarek Mitri joining the conference. Gemayel, a Christian Maronite, firmly asserted his position. "We will not leave this place before we get what we came here for. This intrusion upon Christianity and our religion threatens national peace, and we are more than capable of taking this to the streets," he stated.

Rai, a pastor of the Maronite Church in Byblos in Metn, stated that the story was the "biggest insult to the Lord Jesus Christ, and his church." "By canceling the show, [Al-Manar and NBN] have given up large sums of money, and that is more important than any apology," the bishop acknowledged.

According to iloubnan.info, Al-Manar and

NBN published a joint statement about the decision to suspend broadcasting the series, stating that the stations "decided to stop airing it ... to prevent any attempt to use it in a negative way." The series was originally supposed to air during Ramadan, a month when TV rating increases.

Some people speculated that the Lebanese General Security Office ordered both stations to suspend the series. However, the office denied the allegations and published a statement contradiction theirs. The statement elaborated that the General Security had reached an agreement with both channels, religious authorities and politicians to "stop broadcasting the series, as an initiative taken by the management of both networks."

This situation re-sparked further debate regarding religion and free speech in Lebanon, where Christian and Muslim sects co-exist. The political structure in Lebanon, which dictates that the president must be a Maronite Christian and the Prime Minister must be a Sunni Muslim, deliberately distributes representation across the faiths. A series about the main figure in Christianity through an Islamic point of view resonated with many groups in the politically and religiously-charged environment.

For the Babylon & Beyond blog at the Los Angeles Times, Patrick Gallagher and Meris Lutz report that Talebzadeh, complained about the decision to the Iranian TV Channel 2. "[Lebanese Christian groups'] protest seems to be political to some extent," he suggested.

According to Gallagher and Lutz, "The debate over the series also touches on the issue of free speech in Lebanon, which is considered freer than most countries in the region but which often censors cultural productions deemed too lewd, politically charged or offensive to religion."

Bassim Hakim expressed his disappointment with the campaign against the television series. "The country of freedom fails the test of freedom, and it is the same country that cannot protect its journalists," he wrote in an article for Lebanese daily newspaper Al-Akhbar.

America's Struggle with Islam

According to a recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll, 31 percent of Republican respondents believe that President Obama is a Muslim, reports Josh Gerstein on Politico's Under the Radar blog.

He compares the results to a recent Time Magazine poll, which asked 1002 respondents "Do you personally believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim or Christian?"

Gerstein points out that Time Magazine's question may have provoked a specific response. "Time asked a question that gave more prominence to the possibility Obama is Muslim, but also may have drawn out more subjective feelings from respondents," Gerstein pointed out. 42 percent of Republican respondents answered that they thought that Obama was a Muslim.

Meanwhile, Pew asked respondents, "Is [President Obama] Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic or something else?" Regardless of the wording, both statistics indicate that the public perception of President Obama as a Muslim are on the rise.

According to Chris McGreal at The Guardian, White House spokesman Bill Burton addressed the issue of the president's faith. "The president is obviously a Christian. He prays everyday," he stated.

Pew's Alan Cooperman analyzed the reasoning behind the poll results. "There are two things going on...one is the percentage of people who think Obama is a Muslim is rising and some of that, it is fair to surmise, is an indication of dislike and distrust of the president. But the other thing is that the percentage of Americans who say he is a Christian is dropping and the numbers who don't know is rising. Those things are true not just among people who don't like the president."

White House officials blamed "misinformation campaigns" and "folks who are intent on spreading falsehoods about the president and his values and

beliefs" for the poll results.

Some commentators defended their viewpoints about the president and his relationship with the Muslim community. Jeff Crouere, a Louisiana-based radio talk show host, addresses President Obama's connections to Islam at Bayou Buzz News. "President Obama may not be a practicing Muslim, but he certainly favors giving Muslims preferential treatment," he writes, referring to Obama's speech in Cairo.

"He has Muslim relatives and his father was a Muslim. He spent some of his formative years in a Muslim nation learning about the faith and appreciating its customs...all of a sudden, after his election, he was eagerly embracing his Muslim heritage," Crouere continues. Although he acknowledges that there are billions of peaceful Muslims across the globe, the radio talk show host believes that President Obama favors "the interests of the Arabs over the Jews."

Crouere also spoke about the recent controversy surrounding the Ground Zero mosque and community center. "Radical Islamic terrorists attacked this country on that day and our nation is still at war with those who want to kill Americans and our way of life. A mosque on that site is not appropriate and not wanted by the American people," he asserted.

Crouere's opinions about the Ground Zero mosque reflect those of the Americans demonstrating in the streets. James Nachtwey for Time Magazine comments, "You don't have to be prejudiced against Islam to believe, as many Americans do, that the area around Ground Zero is a sacred place." However, he also laments that the sentiments have erupted into a "political issue."

Nachtwey believes that the debate over the proposed community center raises important questions: "Does America have a problem with Islam? Have the terrorist attacks of 9/11 — and other attempts since — permanently excluded Muslims from full assimilation into American life?"

According to a Time Magazine poll, 46 percent of Americans believes that Islam is more likely than other faith to encourage violence against non believers.

Associating Islam with terrorism and violence may be indicative of a growing presence of "Islamophobia" in the United States.

"To be a Muslim in America now is to endure slings and arrows against your faith — not just in the schoolyard and the office but also outside your place of worship and in the public square," Nachtwey observes.

Ali Ibrahim the Deputy Editor-in-Chief for AsharqAlawsat addresses the issue in an article at the news site. "Muslims are not responsible for what the terrorists did on September 11th, and there were also Muslim victims in these attacks," he asserts.

Ibrahim observes that the controversy has "rekindled an atmosphere similar to the Islamophobia that was apparent the period after the September 11th attacks."

The editor notes that the controversy about the mosque is making it difficult for Islamic groups to correct misconceptions about the faith and the larger community's connection, or lack thereof, to the terrorists who perpetrated the attacks of September 11.

"The solution? Perhaps the way out is to return the issue to its local framework, as a matter for the residents of New York to decide what they want, within the framework of their local laws. However, there is nothing wrong with taking into account the feelings raised, on the grounds that the project serves Muslim Americans who must be a part of the interactions of their local community," Ibrahim concludes.

Al-Jazeera Collects Awards

For the third consecutive year, the Qatar-based channel Al-Jazeera English was nominated for an Emmy award in the News and Current Affairs categories, whose winners will be announced on September 27 in New York, reports CBS News. The international Emmys are recognize excellence in television production outside the US and are carried out by the International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, representing more than 50 countries.

Al-Jazeera English's coverage on the Israel-Hamas Gaza War in January 2009 is competing with three other reports from Sky News (United Kingdom) for its coverage on the rise of Taliban forces in Pakistan, RT Channel (Russia) for its report on Barack Obama's visit to Russia, and TV Globo (Brazil), for its broadcast on a huge power outage in Brazil.

In its News Hours show, Al-Jazeera English managed to provide unprecedented and unparalleled coverage on the conflict that took place in Gaza in 2009, thanks to reporters positioned on both sides of the border. Moreover the concerned broadcast was produced right after a ground offensive in the land on January 5, 2009, reports The Peninsula.

According to Bruce L. Paisner, president and CEO of the academy, the nominees “offer a fascinating window into the human drama constantly unfolding around the world in conflict zones, politics or even daily life.” He emphasizes that the role of the News category is to “congratulate them for their outstanding achievements in television reporting.”

Not only is Al-Jazeera is praised for the quality of its coverage, along with Al-Jazeera English, but also for its children programming on Al-Jazeera Children's Channel (JCC) that gained the best short documentary film award in Anthropology for its documentary entitled “Written in the Wind” at the Jade Kunlun Awards, 2010 World Mountain Documentary Festival of Qinghai China on August 7th, communicates Al Bawaba. The festival of Qinghai is a yearly event that celebrates credible and community-based development and environmental salvation in mountain regions.

The award-winning 26-minutes long JCC's documentary, “Written in the Wind”, deals with ‘Silbo’, a language of whistling that is a unique wealth to La Gomera island, one of the Canari Islands. “Written in the Wind” praises the La Gomera community for its great efforts to save this particular means of communication.

JCC was previously awarded recognition by the “the Ecumenical Jury Award in Berlinale 2009 for its long documentary Aisheen Still Alive in Gaza and Al-Jazeera Golden Award for Baghdad Angel at Al-Jazeera International

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The *Layalina Review* is brought to you thanks to a grant from The Dr. Scholl Foundation of Illinois. Compiled by Layalina Staff. The views expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc. Inaugurated in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, private sector corporation, Layalina Productions, Inc. is dedicated to bridging the growing divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialogues through effective commercial television programming. Layalina develops and produces informative and entertaining Arabic-language programming for licensing to satellite and cable television networks throughout the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Layalina is funded solely through tax-deductible donations from individuals and corporations, and through grants by foundations based in the US and the Arab world. Please support Layalina by making a tax-deductible donation. Visit www.layalina.tv or call 202-776-7761 for more information.