

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Al-Jazeera Contentious Relations with Bahrain.

In one of its latest rows, the Qatari government-funded Al-Jazeera sparked another controversy over its coverage of poverty and the treatment of Asian laborers in Bahrain in its series “Economy and Men,” reports Reuters. The Bahraini government eventually banned the broadcaster’s activities in the country.

Al-Jazeera holds a long track record of disputes with numerous Arab states, which deem the channel’s coverage inappropriate and politically destabilizing. Pro-Western Arab governments, particularly those of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, repeatedly accuse Al-Jazeera of bias. Many members of the channels have been accused of entertaining close ties to Islamic movement’s members, fostering a bias in its coverage.

Bahrain barred a crew from traveling to the Gulf state, accusing Al-Jazeera of “flouting press rules.” Without providing additional details, the official news agency of Bahrain announced the country’s decision to consequently “temporarily freeze the office of the Qatari Al-Jazeera Satellite TV Channel.” Officials at Bahrain’s Ministry of Information either declined to comment or could not be reached.

Some observers suspect that the move reflects Bahrain and Qatar’s battle over the Hawar islands, a dispute that was settled in 2001, adds Reuters. Having been refused permission to operate in Bahrain in 2002, Al-Jazeera was permitted to resume its coverage of the country in 2007. Relations between the channel and the government of Bahrain, though punctuated with a few incidents had remained relatively smooth until now.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz remarks that Al-Jazeera’s editorial policies and journalism etiquette caused similar outrage in 2009 with the Palestinian Authority for inciting viewers against PA leader Mahmoud Abbas. The apolitical bloc consequently banned the channel from operating on its territories.

Last year, Israel also clashed with the Qatari broadcaster, imposing sanctions on Al-Jazeera after the closure of the Israeli trade office in Qatar, which hosted and funded the network. Qatar closed the office in a response to Israel’s military offensive in the Gaza Strip, severely restricting the network’s activity in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists expressed dismay over Bahrain’s attempt to muzzle the media, added Reuters. These concerns were echoed by the French organization, Reporters Without Borders, who interpreted Bahrain’s suspension of Al-Jazeera as another move to tighten the government’s grip on the media, reports The International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX).

In a communiqué published by the Bahrain News Agency, the culture and information ministry announced that the suspension would remain in force until the ministry and Al-Jazeera reached an agreement “protecting the rights of both sides on the basis of reciprocity in exercising press and media work in both countries.”

According to Gulf Daily News, Bahrain Journalists Association’s deputy chairman and a leading columnist, Faisal Abdulla Shaikh, challenged the decision, calling for an agreement to be reached between the parties. Mr Shaikh added, “Everyone in Bahrain wants the dispute to end. I hope that will happen soon.”

As of the date of publication, the

situation remains unresolved.

Al-Jazeera’s influence and its capacity to stir controversy remains astounding, notes The Economist. Characterizing it as the “most powerful news-and-current-affairs channel” in the Arab world, the British publication remarks that the Qatari-based channel is well ahead of its competitors, such as Saudi-funded Al-Arabiya.

Al-Jazeera’s influence may continue to increase, as the emir of Qatar plans to increase funding for offices in London, Washington DC and Kuala Lumpur. The channel’s reach and unmatched coverage of events worldwide casts a shadow

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over Western media outlets, which are being relegated to second place.

In other news, the ever expanding and prolific Al-Jazeera held its fifth Annual Forum in Doha between May 22 and May 24, reports Zawya.

Titled “The Arab and Muslim World: Alternative Visions,” the event gathered a jamboree of journalists, political analysts, activists, media expert, and intellectuals to take an in-depth look at alternative visions for the Arab and Muslim World by presenting the views of emerging movements, non-state actors, civil societies, and governments influencing the region.

Al-Jazeera’s anti-Western populism was strongly echoed at its recent forum on “the Arab and Muslim world: Alternative Visions.” Many speakers, denoting piety or loyalty to political Islam, prefaced their remarks with incantations of reverence for the Prophet Muhammad.

Shanghais Pavilions: A New Diplomatic Step

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently visited the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai, writes Nicole Gaouette at Bloomberg Business Week, signaling the importance that Washington grants to its relations with China. This “hands-on work of public diplomacy” is heralded as an opportunity for the US to reach out to millions of Chinese and promote ties between the two countries.

“Is it an opportunity for the United States to hit a homerun on the public diplomacy side and on the commercial diplomacy side where the creation of jobs is so critically important for us right now,” said Jon Huntsman, the US ambassador to China.

However, the project was not immediately welcomed. Congressional restrictions regarding spending of public money jeopardized the United States’ participation in the Shanghai

Expo, reports Mark Landler at The New York Times. The construction of the US Pavilion, or “the house that Hillary built” according to Landler, was made possible because of Clinton’s efforts in raising 61 million dollars from corporate sponsors including Johnson & Johnson, General Electric Co., Chevron, Pfizer, Disney, Alcoa and many more.

Nearly 200 countries, including Iran and North Korea, were represented at the Expo, aiming to be the biggest staged event in history. Trudy Rubin, an opinion columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, mentions that the United States was one of the last countries to confirm attendance, which sparked criticism from the Chinese media.

“We think government-to-government relations are very important, but we think people-to-people relations are the most important foundation for the future of our two countries,” Clinton said in attempt to dismiss any rumors, relieved with the country’s participation in such a significant event.

According to Ambassador-at-Large Elizabeth Bagley, the 6,000-square-meter Pavilion is meant to convey “the story of the American spirit.” Avoiding any controversy or polarizing issues, the Pavilion avoids mentioning values such as free speech or freedom of religion, and focuses instead on “prosperity, sustainability and children’s visions for the future.”

Visitors at the Pavilion have a chance to view three short films chosen to portray the “American spirit,” notes Kim Ghattas for the BBC. The films show Americans trying to speak Chinese and included testimonials about sustainable energy, water conservation and family values.

However, according to Matthew Yglesias in an opinion piece at the Think Progress Blog, the US Pavilion did not manage to showcase the country’s democratic values and historic achievements, and rather limited itself to being a commercial showcase.

While the Expo gave Chinese people with limited economic means a chance to travel to Shanghai and see the world through the national pavilions, Yglesias remarks that the “mightiest nation on earth” has “managed to assemble what

amounts to a series of advertisements for the US brands who put up the money plus a couple of barely coherent movies.”

Chairman of the steering committee for the USA Pavilion, Franklin Lavin, provided a different justification of the movie selection. “We knew people would like whiz-bang,” said Lavin, “but we felt if we had one thing to say, it’s about the magic of how our society works - the civic behavior.”

According to Bloomberg Business Week, Lavin stressed that the US Pavilion highlighted multiculturalism and individuality. “What makes America work is the opposite of teamwork...

“[The World Expo] is an opportunity for the United States to hit a homerun on the public diplomacy side and on the commercial diplomacy side.”

Jon Huntsman, the US ambassador to China.

Everyone works on individual desires, but collaborates” Lavin said.

When asked by a reporter about her opinion of the US Pavilion, Clinton tepidly replied, “It’s fine.” She added nonetheless, “Can you imagine if we had not been here?”

Bob Jacobson, a public policy activist, addresses the question in an article for The Huffington Post. He claims that the outcome of the event would have been less disappointing, had the United States been present with a “good” pavilion portraying an authentic representation of the US, rather than producing an image marred by commercial interventions which portrayed “Americans as children

and the pawns of corporate power.”

In another article for The Huffington Post, Jacobson argues, “The US Pavilion may...be a stalking horse for a policy leading to the substantial or complete privatization of State’s public diplomacy activities.” Money raised from private operators to build the US Pavilion will transform public diplomacy efforts into “a private operation accountable only to powerful interests,” warns Jacobson.

Similarly, in a post on The Foundry Blog at The Heritage Foundation, Helle Dale comments, “As a world leader, the United States cannot be lackadaisical about the power of symbols and images.” However, Dale comments that there is nothing wrong with “corporate sponsorship” which facilitated the United States’ participation in the Shanghai World Expo.

Absence of US representation in this public diplomacy extravaganza, which China predicts will draw as many as 100 million visitors by October 1, could have been interpreted as an oversight on the State Department’s part.

However, Dale warns that the lack of appropriate planning and coordination may “backfire,” which would jeopardize the creativity and flexibility the private sector could bring into the public-private partnership for public diplomacy.

Signs of hasty planning are visible through the lack of aesthetics in the building structure, and “the absolute lack of a coherent public message to go with the US attendance at the World Expo,” she adds. While the US Pavilion has received negative coverage, partly due to the implications of corporate financing, it appears to be one of the most successful and mostly visited pavilions at the fair, with an expectation of 70 million visitors over the next six months, reports BBC.

“To have six or seven million young Chinese to file through our Pavilion is an opportunity that we would otherwise never be able to achieve in public diplomacy, at least not traditional public diplomacy,” Ambassador Huntsman told the BBC.

“And if that results in better relations, if it results in better attitudes to the United States and certain buying preferences, then you get a bit of public diplomacy and you get a bit of commercial diplomacy.”

Israel’s Public Image Going Adrift

The Israeli military raid on a Turkish-sponsored flotilla attempting to break the siege of Gaza, on May 31, generated widespread anger, while dealing a serious blow to Israel’s image in the West, reports Leon T. Hadar for The Huffington Post.

Approximately nine campaigners aboard the Turkish steamer were shot dead when Israeli commandos, descending from helicopters, boarded the ship in international waters. Dozens more were wounded. Israeli commandos boarded and commandeered five smaller crafts without violence. They brought all six vessels to the Israeli port of Ashdod, where the campaigners on board were arrested pending deportation. At the time of writing, the campaigners were returned to Turkey.

Hadar admonishes against the use of military intervention where he believes non-violent options were possible, “The incident points out to issues that go beyond what was obviously a failed military operation based on faulty intelligence that has resulted in humanitarian tragedy and a diplomatic and public relations disaster for the Israelis.”

“The [Israeli raid] points out to issues that go beyond what was obviously a failed military operation.”

Leon T. Hadar, Journalist and foreign affairs analyst.

Hadar states that the flotilla, referred to in the Arab world as the “Freedom Flotilla”, did not represent any security concern to the state of Israel, and was rather a diplomatic and public annoyance to the Jewish state. Turkish and Western aid organizations were quite opened about

their intentions, having received broad coverage of the operation. The attention that the organization gathered should have made Israel more cautious in its use of violence, particularly at a time when its relationship with Turkey is deteriorating.

The flotilla raid comes along other past grievances that the Hebrew state has had to deal with in addressing its public image, notably the Gaza operations of December 2008. “Israel has yet to recover from the devastating international condemnation of its earlier offensive in Gaza,” Hadar points out. He believes that the raid on the flotilla “was a political blunder” that did not achieve anything other than increasing Israel’s losses.

According to Jewish Journal, Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s Foreign Minister, responded that the Gaza aid convoy was nothing more than a violent propaganda against Israel’s sovereignty. “There is no humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip,” Lieberman declared during a foreign ministry briefing on the aid convoy’s progress towards the shores of Gaza. “Despite Hamas’ war crimes against Israeli citizens and the thousands of rockets fired at Israeli towns, Israel continues to respond in the most humane ways possible.”

Israel’s Foreign Ministry held a series of meetings with ambassadors from European countries, urging them to end the campaign that they deemed to be a “blatant provocation” under the guise of humanitarian aid. Lieberman stressed at the meetings that Israel had previously permitted thousands of tons of products to enter the Gaza Strip on a daily basis.

Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader based in Gaza, who anticipated Israel’s raid, viewed the flotilla as a sign that the world opposes the siege on the Gaza Strip, reports Haaretz. Haniyeh remarked that the raid would have disastrous consequences on Israel’s image, adding that this would be a victory for Hamas.

After months of seeking to draw international attention Gaza’s way, the attack helped Hamas catapult the siege on Gaza to the headlines of international newspapers and western policy assessments, notes The Economist. Haniyeh pointed out that despite Europe and America’s opposition to the boycott, the continued support to Israel

and ostracizing policies towards Hamas, strongly undermines their position.

Ban Ki-moon, secretary-general of the UN, required “a full investigation to determine exactly how this bloodshed took place.” He added, “I believe Israel must urgently provide a full explanation.” French President Nicolas Sarkozy also disparaged Israel’s disproportionate use of force, while other European nations issued stern public reprimands. The Economist notes that approximately 800 campaigners are European nationals.

However, Washington was initially more cautious in its response, trying to discern the “circumstances surrounding this tragedy.” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was scheduled to meet President Obama in Washington on June 1, but canceled the visit and returned to Israel to address the diplomatic crisis.

Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed, manager of Al-Arabiya, argues for Asharq Alawsat that the flotilla raids served political purposes for both Hamas and the Israel, namely to put a halt to any negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. “I am certain that the current extremist Israeli leadership finds that its best allies are the extremists in the region [...] achieving the same goal; to thwart Obama’s plan,” he opines.

Because of the events on the Freedom Flotilla, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is now finding itself into another political and diplomatic hurdle, putting a halt on any negotiations, which he recently approved following Arab and international reassurances.

In the meantime, Israel’s media is growing increasingly critical of the immediate aftermath of the raids, while maintaining that the military intervention was nonetheless justified, reports The Guardian.

“They chose this way,” said Alon Ben David, defense correspondent of Israel’s Channel 10. “Israeli forces had no choice but to open fire and the result was much worse than we’d wanted,” he surmised.

Writing in Haaretz, military correspondent Amos Harel berated the Israeli army for falling into a trap set by the aid flotilla, landing the nation in a “diplomatic mess”. He insisted

however that the military did nothing wrong and defended the use of force.

Ynet News front page headlined “The Trap,” reported that the army didn’t have enough information about the strength of resistance it would face on the flotilla, resulting in the death of nine civilians. The paper’s finance editor, Sever Plocker, referred to the raid as a “provocative trap set by Hamas” and called for Defense Minister Ehud Barak’s resignation.

Furthermore, many media commentators expressed their anger over the fact that Israel was late in releasing its version of events. The National PR headquarters argued that the IDF spokesman was responsible for releasing the information to the public, points out Roni Sofer for Yediot YNet News. Yet the IDF Spokesman’s Office pointed its finger back at the Foreign Ministry.

PR chief Nir Hefetz and Hasbara Minister Yuli Edelstein were in Canada with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. For hours, the harsh accusations against Israel, accompanied by international protests and condemnations, were left without an Israeli response.

The flotilla raid drew widespread media coverage across the Middle East and promoted further condemnation of Israel in Iraq, reports The New York Times. “Let the American Embassy hear your loud voices,” declared Abdel-Hadi Said, a cleric who helped lead the demonstration in Baghdad. “No, no to America,” some in the crowd shouted. “No, no to Israel.” “Yes, yes to Islam,” others chanted.

Iraq’s Interior Minister, Jawad al-Bolani, a secular Shiite politician, attended the rally, a sign of the Sadrists’ clout in Iraq. “Our protest today confirms that Iraqis are standing next to their Palestinian brothers against the crime that Israel committed,” he said.

Sex and the City Sells Bias, Not Tickets

The popular television series “Sex and the City,” which follows the lives of

four women in New York City, recently released a sequel to its adapted movie version, which sparked uproar for its stereotyped depiction of the Middle East, writes Christine Kearney for ABC News.

The movie, “Sex in the City 2,” which depict “swilling cocktails, saucy language and wearing sexy outfits,” depicts a part of the story in Abu Dhabi, but was in fact filmed in Morocco. Dubbed racist by some critics, for their depictions of Muslim women, the cast defended the movie by arguing that some scenes here the four women seek to understand the wearing of the burqa show their curiosity, rather than an attempt a religious slur.

Actress Cynthia Nixon, one of the leading characters, said the film is not trying to say, “Women have all the freedoms in America and none of the freedoms in the Middle East, it is far more nuanced and complicated than that.” He colleague on screen echoes her statement, stating the movie is for entertainment, “not apolitical thriller.”

Andrew O’Hehir for Salon, spared no critique on the movie as he disparaged it for its offensiveness and “cotton candy fantasy accessorized with materialism and fashion porn.”

Denouncing the deluge of clichés regarding the Middle East, O’Hehir believes the movie is nothing more than a “cinematic Viagra for Western cultural imperialists who still ignorantly and inaccurately paint the entire Middle East.” What is most insultin gin the movie is the succession of stereotypes that come to characterize a vision of the Middle East that little to do with the reality on the ground, and rather is “a consumerist-masturbation fantasy where the ‘90s never ended.”

The vision of Sex and the City 2 of the Middle East is reduced to cultural clichés and gratuitous display of ignorance about the region. But O’Hehir reassures the reader, claiming that the region does not get a special treatment after all as it is in fact offensive to all parties who may ever identify with the characters or settings.

The topics broached on are also considered taboo in a region where social and religious conservatism rule. “In the Middle East there are three taboos that people don’t talk about: religion, sex

and politics,” commented Mohammed Aboelenein for ABC, chairman of the sociology department at the UAE University at Al-Ain, exposing the contrast between America and the Arab world.

The movie’s depiction of an imaginary Middle East is product of mythological clichés, according to Jack Shaheen, author of “Reel Bad Arabs.”

“When I hear about the Sex and the City, Abu Dhabi isn’t exactly the destination that comes to mind.”

Mike Baldwin, Blogger.

Wajahat Ali observes in an article at Salon that this version of the Middle East is littered with vulgar renditions that make the movie offensive and superficial in its approach to some controversial topics. He explains, “Only when that materialism is taken away do they worry, in only the most superficial way, about sexual hypocrisy and women’s oppression.

The movie jokes about burqas and includes “gossip about whether a Middle Eastern butler is gay,” observes Kearney. And finally, the four characters speak about oppression of Muslim and Arab women bluntly, yet carelessly: “Forget the oppressed women of Abu Dhabi. Let’s buy more bling for the burqa!” decries Ali for Salon.

Ali concludes that the movie calls on the audiences to believe that Muslim women in the Middle East are equally self-absorbed, vain and materialistic as the quartet and brings final blow by actually failing to let nay Muslim character speak out.

For ABC News, Christine Kearney argues that SATC 2 should stir some controversy in the Middle East. Baldwin accounts that some opponents believe that the incidents in the movie do

not portray Abu Dhabi’s diversity.

The number of negative stereotypes about Middle East rose after September 11, 2001, mostly depicted in wars and dramatic movies about conflicting cultures. SATC 2 is particularly “offending a non-Western culture”, according to Baldwin.

Kearney for ABC News added that SATC 2 will not be shown in the Middle East.

The Many Facets of Global Engagement

Marc Lynch and Kristin M. Lord recently published a sixty page report titled “America’s Extended Hand: An Assessment of the Obama Administration’s Global Engagement Strategy” for The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) detailing President Barack Obama’s invigorated foreign policy strategy in restoring America’s image abroad. To compile the report, Lynch and Lord interviewed around fifty government officials working in the fields of public diplomacy and strategic communications.

Lynch goes over the main argument of the report in his Foreign Policy column, assessing the administration’s global public engagement strategy and its implementation to date.

The George Washington University professor intended to provide in the report a comprehensive overview of “how the Obama administration thinks about public engagement, how it has attempted to reorganize the government to deliver on that vision, and how it has performed across a number of crucial issues.” Despite initial success in managing to re-engage America with the rest of the world, the current administration has been less fruitful to some extent in administering engagement campaigns to meet “specific strategic objectives.”

In the initial section of the assessment, Lynch and Lord noted that the Obama administration “raised expectations that... [it] could not fulfill in the short term and is scrambling to fulfill in the longer term.” The two experts point out the growing gap between the expectations and the tangible results delivered on the ground,

exposing the pernicious effect that it has on America’s engagement strategy overall.

James Ketterer at the Foreign Policy Association’s Global Engagement Blog urges readers to peruse the report. He concurs with the report’s call to redefine the roles of the Defense and State Departments, but adds that its execution will be difficult. “[This goal] will require additional funding at State, delivering better support for Foreign Service Officers...and finding ways in which to finally fully integrate public diplomacy into the overall work of the State Department,” he comments. “Is there support [from] Capitol Hill?”

“[The Obama administration has] raised expectations that... [it] could not fulfill in the short term and is scrambling to fulfill in the longer term.”

Marc Lynch and Kristin M. Lord, authors of a report for the Center for a New American Security

While Ketterer praises the special attention that was given to Turkey and Brazil for the recent nuclear deal they struck with Iran, he points out that the challenges ahead are to be defined. He deplores as well that the report failed to address in depth cultural and educational affairs, waxing that it should be “seen as a key tool in the engagement toolbox.”

While cultural and educational affairs never recovered from the demise of USIA, they remain pivotal for long-term engagement, and Ketterer calls for a better use of the public diplomacy tools by foreign policy strategists. But listening is the strong point of America’s foreign policy noted in the report.

However, not all experts are enamored with the Obama administration's engagement strategy. In Asia Times Online, Dilip Hiro proclaims that the "American century is so over."

Hiro observes that President Barack Obama's pattern of dealing with foreign countries means exerting pressure and threats "with dire consequences if [the leader] does not bend to Washington's will."

Among a number of examples, Hiro highlights Obama's confrontation with Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu, when in an effort to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process the American president asked for a halt to the settlement as a condition to move forward. Despite numerous back-and-forth, Hiro deplores that the exchanges never went any further than talks, eventually failing to achieve concrete results.

Ultimately, Palestinian Authority officials agreed to participate in "proximity talks," despite Netanyahu's refusal to meet the conditions. "Simply put, it was Obama who bent to Netanyahu's will. The tail wagged the dog," states Hiro. "Both sides now know that Obama will shy away from pressuring Israel where it hurts."

For The Jerusalem Post, Herb Keinon reflects on the reasoning behind Obama's shift in tone with Israeli leaders. Initially, the administration came out swinging, criticizing Israel's position and actions in regards to settlement expansion and the peace process. According to Keinon, President Benjamin Netanyahu was treated like an "unsavory Third World dictator" when he met with President Obama after an AIPAC conference.

"He was also reportedly given a list of demands by the administration, to which he was expected to respond immediately," Keinon continues.

Abruptly, "the Obama administration unleashed an unprecedented charm offensive that culminated Tuesday with a presidential meeting with Jewish congressmen, during which Obama reportedly admitted that he made some missteps in the Israel-US relation."

Keinon attributes the administration's turn-around to Jewish public opinion in the United States. A national Quinnipiac University survey released on April 22

concluded that 67 percent of American Jews disapprove of Obama's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. An April McLaughlin & Associates poll found that 46 percent of Jewish voters said they would consider voting for someone else in the next presidential election.

In this case, Keinon concludes that domestic policy and public opinion have a large impact on American foreign policy. This factor may hurt the Obama administration's original foreign policy objectives.

However, Marc Lynch urges the government to continue on its current path. "With a palpable sense of the Obama bubble deflating, and a pernicious consensus emerging of a "say-do" gap in which the US fails to deliver on its highly public promises, we urge the administration to do more to prepare the ground and to follow through on its engagement."

Critiquing the Bureaucracy

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, is lobbying for money to support diplomatic and development programs along with other Defense Department leaders, reports Josh Rogin at Foreign Policy.

Mullen wrote to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, criticizing Democratic Senator Kent Conrad's proposal for the fiscal 2011 budget, which includes a four billion dollars cut.

"We are living in times that require an integrated national security program with budgets that fund the full spectrum of national security efforts, including vitally important pre-conflict and post-conflict civilian stabilization programs," Mullen protested.

"Diplomatic programs are critical to our long-term security," Mullen continued. The Joint Chiefs' Chairman finds himself in good company with Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who also chided Conrad's proposal.

Pentagon and State Department officials find it increasingly difficult to convince the public of the paramount importance of these programs to achieve US foreign policy objectives.

Defense Secretary Gates, who suggested appropriating Pentagon funds to the State Department to handle overlapping issues between the diplomatic and defense spheres, is spearheading a campaign for a budget increase.

"We are living in times that require an integrated national security program with budgets that fund the full spectrum of national security efforts."

*Admiral Michael Mullen,
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs
of Staff*

But the effectiveness of such campaigns and initiatives remains disputable. Simon Anholt, an independent policy advisor, discussed national reputation and perceptions in an interview posted at eTurboNews. In a conversation with Sandy Dhuyvetter of Business Travel Radio, Anholt discussed his 1996 report titled "Nation Brands of the 21st Century."

Anholts argued that "in fact, governments today have to be brand managers as much as policy makers." He believes that a country is defined by its reputation and that, as a rule, a good reputation can bring about numerous benefits, such as media attention, international visitors, investments and respect from other governments. Although the policy advisor believes

that attending to the country's image is critical, he does not approve of destitute governments wasting money on fruitless PR campaigns. There is "no evidence whatsoever that people are paying attention to this kind of stuff or that it could possibly change the image of the country," he said.

Ultimately, he concluded that a nation's reputation doesn't depend on elaborate campaigns. The reputation is defined by "what they do, what they make, how they do it, [and] how they make things." Despite the initiatives for diplomatic and nation-branding programs, critics argue that the State Department is ineffective in its mission.

Lionel Beehner disparages the State Department's vaguely-worded travel warnings for USA Today. "To read the travel warning on Lebanon makes it sound as if Beirut was as dangerous as Baghdad," he mocks.

Although the State Department advises Americans traveling to the Kyrgyz Republic to "maintain a high level of vigilance," Beehner points out that the instructions do not elaborate how a traveler would remain vigilant. Ultimately, the author argues, Americans rarely heed the travel warnings.

While Beehner understands the necessity for travel advisories, he laments that Americans will largely restrict travel to "safe" places such as Western Europe. "I worry that Americans are taking on the bunker-like mentality of their embassies: larger than life, surrounded by moats (metaphorically speaking), unreachable to the average local," he concludes.

Facebook: to Add, to Ignore or to Block?

While newspapers are usually the most popular media in the Arab world, Facebook and other social media are taking over, mustering 1.5 million members who are turning to the site for getting information, reports Magdi Abdelhadi for BBC News. Renowned for its capacity to evade censorship and

providing a certain degree of anonymity, Facebook is now the most popular media used to access information, despite being increasingly controversial due to its content deemed at time blasphemous.

Social media are redefining the way people go about in finding out news and acquire information. As the internet use if on the rise, these platforms are bound to grow ever more popular while dealing with the commensurate challenges of censorship, privacy and cultural sensitivities. "In societies where political freedoms are severely limited, many have also resorted to Facebook as an alternative to the public sphere," notes Abdelhadi.

The recent edition of Facebook in Arabic 14 months ago spurred a significant growth of users in the Arab world. However, Abdelhadi for BBC News declares factors the overwhelming fact that the youth accounts for the majority of the population in the region, explaining the momentum in the social networking site's growth. However, the survey fails to detail the purposes in the use of Facebook, defining whether it is for chatting and befriending people or to serve political purposes.

Egypt currently counts the largest membership on Facebook in the Arab World, followed by the conservative Saudi Arabia, which records 2.3 million members and in third position, Morocco with 1.8 million members, reports the marketing and communications agency Spot On. There is nonetheless a gender disparity, where most members are men, and only 37% of Arab-region members are women. Lebanon was the only country which did not have such a gap and where both genders were equally using Facebook.

According to Zawya, "some 68% of Facebook users in the Emirates are over 25 years old, flying in the face of perceptions that social media is a 'generation Y' phenomenon". Moreover, blogger Neal Ungerleider points out, "Newspapers in Arab countries are overwhelmingly heavily censored and mind-bogglingly dull". Facebook, blogging and other social media provide this alternative platform where young Arabs are able to voice their concerns, often anonymously, hence not only evading strict censorship but also possible risks of detention or charges. However, a recent hurdle over a cartoon

competition of the Prophet Mohammed on Facebook offended various parties in Pakistan, leading to eventual ban of the social site, remarks, affirms David Weigel for the Washington Post. Interpreted as "a salute to the Danish cartoonists whose cartoons of the prophet of Islam sparked a rash of rioting in 2005," the ban was extended to other internet public interfaces such as YouTube and Wikipedia, barely masking the government's intention to tighten its grip on media and information disseminated to the population.

Opponents of the ban have maintained a similar argument, claiming the government is using the Mohammad drawings as an excuse to censor Facebook, a medium of free speech and dissent, concurs Syed Shoaib Hasan for BBC News. Ali Dayan Hasam, the Human Rights Watch delegate in Pakistan, adds that the government did not prohibit Facebook, but used the court orders to ban it and other websites judged "blasphemous" as an instrument of censorship against political opposition.

Fawad Ali, a university student from Islamabad, complains, "They have blocked off all our sources of independent information."

It is a chance for political debate. El Baradei's Facebook group is one of the most followed in the Arab world, according to Diana Mukkaled for Asharq Alawsat. Supporters and opponents of the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] participate to the discussions, sharing their different points of view. The group updates various news and El Baradei regularly interacts with the members by answering questions.

But Facebook is not only hailed for its potential to advance freedom of speech in the Arab world; the Obama administration heralded the social media site as a powerful tool to carry out its campaign, allowing for greater outreach and positive interaction between citizens and candidates, points out Lalit K Jha for Rediff Business.

According to the Under Secretary Judith McHale, social media such as Facebook and Twitter provide effective tools "to communicate with people". Crowley describes it as an instrument "to clarify the position of the United

States, but we're also using it to help solve challenges that - in the places that the Secretary has visited." He adds, "It both empowers people, it hold - makes governments more accountable."

Even if Facebook favors free speech, it is not a news site or a consistent source of reliable information and hence cannot aim at replacing newspapers, remarks Arab News. Newspapers provide information by qualified journalists who "give their take on the news of the day or wider issues." On the contrary, social networks offer gossip and personal opinions, facts that are rarely, if ever, unchecked.

Domain Names Now Available In Arabic

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has approved the deployment of Arabic-compliant domain names, reports the Associated Press. Although internet users have been able to access Arabic web content, they previously had to type the URL in Latin alphabet. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and the Egypt were the first to launch non-Latin domain names in the Arab world.

ICANN predicts that the innovation will encourage millions of new Arab users to access the internet for the first time. ICANN's CEO, Rod Bergstrom, hypothesized that many Arabs have not joined in the cyber revolution yet because the Latin-based domains are a linguistic and a cultural barrier, which prevents them from accessing the internet.

The availability of Arabic-based domains is likely to pique new user interest for psychological and cultural reasons, contended Bergstrom. Arabic domains are likely to give those users a sense of inclusion, relevance and familiarity that can alleviate trepidations about the internet. Egypt's Information Technology Minister, Tarek Kamel, affirmed this notion, saying that this innovation gives citizens an incentive to become wired, cites the AP.

According to Sinan Antoon of The Khaleej Times, 56 million Arabs are internet-users. The number of Arab users is expected to

grow 50 percent over the next three years, making the importance of Arabic-based domains seem like a foregone conclusion in meeting the increased demand.

On the other hand, Antoon downplays the magnitude of this development in attracting more Arab users. He argues that current Arab users have adapted to the Latin-based domain names, so they have no incentive to use the Arabic-based domain names.

"The web is a revolutionary technology, but an Arabic web is not about to spur an internet revolution."

Sinan Antoon writes for The Khaleej Times.

Antoon speculates that Arabic domains are not big enough news to either persuade or dissuade new users from joining the cyber world. The socioeconomic condition of the Arab citizens is a more important factor to explain why many Arabs do not access the internet. "Changing the alphabet used to form domain names won't exactly attract millions of poor Arabs to the internet," he states. Antoon concludes that breaking the monopoly of the Latin script over domain names is certainly a positive step towards an Arab-friendly cyber world and a more diverse web, but a small step, nonetheless. "The web is a revolutionary technology, but an Arabic web is not about to spur an internet revolution."

or criminal elements in Russia assassinate yet another investigative reporter, it sends a clear message that every person fighting for basic rights is vulnerable to a similar fate," maintains Jennifer Windsor, the executive director of Freedom House.

While countries like Tunisia, Algeria,

Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates also registered declines in press freedom, the Freedom House report revealed positive improvement in Iraq, as political bias declined and attacks on journalists decreased.

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