

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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South Park Generates Anger over M.

Comedy Central has banned any appearance of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad following fears that it could spark an uproar among Muslims worldwide, reports The Huffington Post. In the recent 200th episode of the famously provocative animated show "South Park," a bear was depicted in place of Mohammad, with the word "CENSORED" across it, and every mention of the Prophet was bleeped.

The Huffington Post explains that it is unclear whether the censorship "was executed by the [authors of the show] to mock the hoopla, but what is clear is this is not the first time." "South Park" creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker previously tried to insert Islamic figures into the show at the time of the Danish cartoon debates, but Comedy Central refused to air the depictions.

However, The Huffington Post notes that the pair did air an episode which included "an image of Mohammad years before [the Danish controversy,] and a clip of it... runs during the show's opening in dozens of countries, in syndication, on Comedy Central, but garnered no attention."

Shortly after the controversy surrounding the Mohammad cartoons, Comedy Central received death threats from the Islamic group Revolution Muslim, reports Glossy News, and consequently the station announced it would suppress its own press release on the issue. With the safety of its employees in mind, Comedy Central responded to the threat by re-publishing the original press release with all of the sections referring to Mohammad redacted.

The Anti-Defamation League, which has been tracking the New York-based Revolution Muslim, claimed that the

group, which has a dozen members, has a reputation for being anti-Semitic and promoting an extremist version of Islam, reports The Baltimore Sun. The founders are converts to Islam, including one who was previously Jewish and associated with a group called Jews for Allah.

Revolution Muslim warned the animators that if they depicted the Prophet, they could end up like murdered Dutch filmmaker Theo VanGogh.

"Comedy Central now realizes that even mentioning Muh... whoops, almost did it again," spokesman John Longfellow said. "I swear, I'm going to get myself killed. This is dangerous stuff."

According to Glossy News, Parker and Stone attempted to weigh in on this latest development on NBC's Today Show. "It starts with giving up your right to free speech in the name of safety, but then what," asked Parker. "Are we going to start making women wear burqas if people keep threatening to blow us up otherwise? Where is the line? Where does it end?"

Parker and Stone continued to discuss how vital free speech is in American society, adding that Americans "shouldn't give in to terrorist threats." That section of the interview was never aired on the Today show. NBC producers claimed that they ran out of time for Parker's and Stone's interview, but some believe that there is more behind NBC's actions.

Another cartoonist, Molly Norris, launched and dedicated a special campaign to Stone and Parker over the issue, reports The Washington Post. The "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day," scheduled for May 20, 2010, invited hundreds of people to send their own contribution. However, Norris felt that it had been appropriated and misunderstood by too many uncontrollable parties, and she consequently cancelled the event.

Jon Wellington began a Facebook page publicizing the event, and told the

Washington Post that, "I created a Facebook event because that's an easy way to remind myself of upcoming events, and I thought it might serve that purpose for others too." According to Michael Cavanaugh at The Washington Post, some artists are already posting their own images of Mohammad, "which range from the straight-forward to the angry to the overtly scatological. Any depiction of Mohammad is considered blasphemous by some Muslims."

A recent survey conducted by Zogby International shows that a majority of Americans (71 percent) disagreed with Comedy Central's decision to censor the "South Park" depiction of

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the Prophet, reports The Huffington Post. The sentiment extended beyond party lines, with 60 percent of Democrats, 87 percent of Republicans, and 68 percent of Independents disagreeing with the decision.

“It starts with giving up your right to free speech in the name of safety, but then what?”

Trey Parker, Co-Creator of “South Park.”

Intensity is also on the side of those who disagree with Comedy Central’s decision. While almost half (47 percent) of American adults strongly disagree with the decision, only 5% strongly agree with censoring of the “South Park” episode.

The Sufis Get into Television

A new Sufi satellite television channel, Al-Azmiyah Tariqah (The Path) targeting Sufi audiences in the Arab world, as well as other sects, backed by Gulf and Saudi funds is about to be launched on the pan-Arab free-to-air satellite television market, reports Hamad Al-Majid for Asharq Alawsat.

Al-Majid points out that while Sufi Sheikhs are wealthy enough to be independent from the financial backing of Saudi patrons, it remains puzzling why numerous Sufi followers who enjoy significant political clouts have “allowed ‘Salafist and Wahabi’ media to grow strong,” until now.

As Middle Eastern societies have grown more conservative in recent years – partly due to the popularity of Saudi-funded Salafi religious satellite television programming – Sufism has come under attack, said some of the station’s founders. Sheikh Alaa Abul-

Azayem, the head of the Sufi Azayemiya order in Egypt declared that one of the objectives of this channel is also to offset the Saudi-funded satellite television market dominated by “Salafist and Wahabi extremists and fundamentalists.”

Abu Al-Azayim hopes that the channel will act as an ideological foil to the dozens of conservative Salafi satellite channels that compete for viewers across the region – stations that “routinely attack Sufi thought, pollute the practice of Islam with an ultra-conservative ideology and defame the religion’s reputation throughout the world.”

He argues that the Salafist channels are run by ignorant people who do not understand Islam nor its inner spiritual struggles and formulate their view of the religion through a series of interdictions.

However, the organizers of the channel remain positive, declaring that it would be the fourth in the Middle East to identify specifically with Sufi Islamic thought, according to The National. The aim of the channel is also to help propagate Sufism’s moderate conception of Islam.

Al-Majid of Asharq Alawsat argues that Salafism has been more popular, not because it enjoys greater funding but because it “is more convincing” than Sufism, which is generally perceived as a heretical practice of Islam. He fears that the launch of this new channel may therefore be entering the market at a disadvantage. He adds, “In fact I pity the forthcoming Sufi channel, as I question how it will manage to convince the new and educated and intellectual generations of certain Sufi practices that have no basis in Sharia law or common reason.”

Sufi channels are generally livelier, presenting music and sound effects, some of them even featuring female presenters, while the Salafi channels are more conservative and austere, presenting a strict interpretation of Islam.

While conflicts with regional governments are a potential pitfall for Salafi stations, Al-Azayim is confident he can avoid problems with Cairo’s political authorities, reports The National. Religiously-themed television stations are illegal in Egypt, but they are frequently broadcast from abroad and the government is likely to

favor a channel that promotes a more moderate view of Islam, Al-Azayim said.

Mohammed Habib, a spokesman for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, opposes the ideological agenda of the channel, declaring that it would “serve the ruling regime by letting them use Sufi thought against political Islam.” Habib considers that the channel is attempting to review Islam, potentially inducing confusion and misunderstanding.

Al-Azayim added that he had already had positive discussions with NileSat, an Egyptian government-owned satellite operator and one of the largest satellite services in the Middle East.

“People have diverted from the righteous path, and the satellite [channel] would help people understand the right message of Islam and take people back to it.”

Sheikh Sayf Al-Azmy, Al-Azmiyah Tariqah.

Like other religious satellite stations, the channel will feature Sufi music and poetry, talk shows, theological discussions and lectures, as well as spiritually-themed films and serials. Sheikh Sayf al Azmy, the leader of the Sudanese branch of the Al-Azmiyah tariqah and one of the new station’s organizers comments, “People have diverted from the righteous path, and the satellite would help people understand the right message of Islam and take people back to it.”

Social Entrepreneurship Summit: A continuation of Obama's Foreign Policy

A year after President Obama's call for a "new beginning" in US-Muslim relations, the White House organized a two day summit on entrepreneurship to promote business ties with the Muslim world, reports The Washington Times. Entrepreneurs, investors, academics and others from nations as diverse as Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait and Israel convened to the summit, where senior officials from the Obama administration, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, gave keynote speeches.

"We believe entrepreneurship is a fundamental American value; it's also a force that has the ability to unlock opportunity for people around the world," said Ben Rhodes, White House Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication. The Washington Times explains that the summit, co-hosted by the Commerce and State departments at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, aimed to "breed job creation and community development in their home countries."

President Obama has made outreach to the Muslim world one of the central tenets of his foreign policy, and this summit fit in perfectly with his long-term policy objectives. Rhodes described the summit as "part of a very long-term program" of partnering with countries to promote mutually beneficial entrepreneurship.

Touching on core concerns that Muslim communities might have with US foreign policy, President Obama explained that he has "worked to ensure that America once again meets its responsibilities, especially when it comes to the security and political issues that have often been a source of tension."

Meetings at the summit focused on improving access to capital, energizing young people and developing the role of

Arab businesswomen, comments Steven Stanek for The National. The summit assembled a diverse group of panelists, ranging from the Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, the managing director of the Grameen Bank, to Chris Hughes, the co-founder of the social networking site Facebook. According to a White House statement, the summit emphasized the engagement of young entrepreneurs.

The White House urged groups outside the government to participate by organizing their own related events, which spawned more than 30 other sessions by such groups as the National US-Arab Chamber of Commerce, Arab Empowerment and the Middle East Youth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. Furthermore, as part of Obama's plan, The National remarks that the United States is poised to award contracts through its multi-million-dollar Global Technology and Innovation Fund, which was designed to spur investments to companies in the Muslim world.

Tim Kane, researcher at the Kaufman Foundation for Entrepreneurship and a guest blogger for The Christian Science Monitor praises the emphasis on business in the Muslim world, which he believes is key to tackle issues in US-Muslim relations. Unlike other summits promoting peace or development, this recent one held the merit of promoting the "transformational power of market capitalism."

He added that while the panels were informative and the participants expressed their hopes for the future, concrete approaches were missing from the debates, such as an avenue for accountability, assessment of labor regulations, and assigning specific parties to solve financial barriers such as access to capital and middle-tier loans.

Kane also lauds Obama's speech, which underscored the importance of entrepreneurship, declaring that it was an "area where we can learn from each other; where America can share our experience as a society that empowers the inventor and the innovator." He also highlighted the mutually beneficial nature of entrepreneurship.

Yet Andrew Albertson, Director of the Project for the Middle East points out in Foreign Policy that such a summit may be unrealistic in its goals, given the high

levels of corruption and "political decay" that abounds in the Arab world. He adds that the Obama administration will need to do much more to address the pleas of the region, involving "sustained efforts to listen and respond to the region's people -- not just their governments."

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also emphasized the positive role of women in Muslim countries as part of a broader drive this week to promote US-Muslims economic ties, reports Agence France Presse. Highlighting the fact that women encounter greater difficulties with accessing loans and equity capital investments, Clinton pointed out, "What we're doing is trying to pry open those doors of opportunity for more people to walk through, more people in Muslim-majority countries and more women specifically."

Clinton pledged, among other things, to pair female entrepreneurs in Muslim countries with US business mentors, who will train them for up to six weeks in California's hi-tech Silicon Valley. This training program is in line with the State Department's campaign to promote women entrepreneurs internationally, underscoring Clinton's views that bettering the lot of women will help lift countries out of war and poverty.

According to Indian Express, Secretary of State Clinton also insisted that partnerships with women are essential to the administration's efforts to improve its relationship with the Muslim World.

However, some Muslims and conservatives expressed grievances with the summit. American Muslims complained that although Obama worked on reaching out and building new relations with Muslim communities abroad, he "has yet to deliver a major speech to the American Muslim community," according to Fox News. At the same time, some conservatives say that the White House's sensitivity to issues that might offend Muslims is compromising US security.

Banning the Burqa in Europe

The recent debate and ensuing decision by the French and Belgian governments to ban the full-body veil has sparked widespread criticism and controversy among human rights groups, who protest that the move restricts freedom of religion, according to David Sapsted for Middle East Online. Muslim and human rights groups pledged to fight the ban in national and international courts.

“Face-covering veils must be totally forbidden in the whole public space because women’s dignity is not divisible,” said Luc Chatel, a spokesman for the French president, before adding, “Wearing a full veil is a sign of a community closing in on itself and of a rejection of our values.”

Yet the legality of such ban is questionable. The Council of State, a government body that advises the French government on legal matters, has warned that a full ban may actually be unconstitutional. Instead, it specified that the ban be limited to a specific list of public buildings, such as schools and tax offices. French President Nicolas Sarkozy rejected the advice and persisted that a legal prohibition must apply to all public places.

Other international human rights organizations have declared such bans to be illegal and a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as violating the rights to freedom of expression and religion. Lawyers for human rights and Islamic groups are preparing to challenge the bans in both national courts and eventually, the European Court of Human Rights.

Judith Sunderland, a senior Western Europe researcher at Human Rights Watch, explained that the reasons evoked for banning the full body veil are incoherent. She added that this latest move by the French government impedes any opportunity for integrating Muslim women into mainstream society, ostracizing them and turning them into criminals for their choice of clothing. Sunderland questioned how wearing the full veil in public threatened safety, public order, health, morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

According to David Sapsted, approximately 2,000 women in France wear the burqa or niqab, and most of them are natively French women who have converted to Islam. In Belgium, the number is thought to be only a few hundred.

Belgium’s lower house of parliament also voted to ban of the full-body veil, which was almost unanimous with 134 MPs in support of the law and two abstentions, reports the BBC. However the phrasing of the law could present an issue and may cause some delays before being passed.

The Muslim Executive of Belgium has criticized the move, claiming that the ban would lead to burqa and niqab-wearing women to be trapped in their homes.

“Wearing a full veil is a sign of a community closing in on itself and of a rejection of our values.”

Luc Chatel, spokesman for French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The ban is seemingly creating a ripple effect, spreading now to Germany where Silvana Koch-Mehrin, a member of the liberal Free Democrats (FDP), said the burqa is “a massive attack on women’s rights” and “a mobile prison,” according to another article from the BBC.

In an article in the German newspaper Bild am Sonntag, Koch-Mehrin declared that wearing the burqa “openly supports values that we do not share in Europe.” Christian Democratic Union politician Wolfgang Bosbach, who heads the German parliament’s home affairs committee, disagreed with Koch-Mehrin, saying such a ban was unnecessary.

The head of Germany’s Muslim Council, Aiman Mazyek, also opposed a ban, called the debate on the veil “quite irrational.” He warned that it will increase the gap

between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Last week, President Sarkozy’s government said that it would push ahead with a ban on the full-face veil in public, including for Muslim tourists, despite warnings from state legal experts that such a law could be unconstitutional.

“The second major principle in France is the rejection of communitarianism. The law treats everybody equally, and that’s the basis of the unity of the republic,” said Alliot-Marie, during talks on legal cooperation in Jordan, according to Middle East Online “Before implementing the law, there will be a stage to educate people and explain why we want to do this.” In France, the law has not yet gone before the French government or parliament. The French law would impose a 150-euro fine for wearing such a veil, or compulsory attendance on a citizenship course. However, even if France and Belgium were to go ahead with the ban, questions remain as to the feasibility of effective enforcement.

Social Media: The Public Diplomacy du Jour

President Obama’s innovative use of social media to reach out to previously unengaged populations at home and around the world has proved very popular, but many fail to acknowledge that the trend actually began in the last months of the Bush administration, says Peter A. Buxbaum at the International Relations and Security Network.

Obama deserves major credit for his use of social media during his campaign and for instigating the same technologies as part of the administration’s public diplomacy initiatives, Buxbaum writes. The Obama administration should also be applauded for its pressure on repressive governments like Iran and China in the area of internet freedoms, he continues.

However, Buxbaum believes that the Bush administration is often overlooked as a pioneer of new media implementation. Towards the end of President Bush’s

second term, his administration began an initiative aimed at combating international terrorists “in the same cyber venue in which they had achieved so much success in propagandizing, recruiting, organizing and fundraising.”

“Our idea was to use technology and social media to promote a conversation in which our views would be aired.”

James K. Glassman, former US Under-secretary of State.

Juan Carlos Zarate, the Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism under President Bush, told Buxbaum that the Bush administration was frustrated that terrorists were using “a technology that we had developed” against US interests.

Former Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James K. Glassman oversaw USG programs intended to “best Al-Qaeda in a Web 2.0 setting.” Glassman told Buxbaum, “Our idea was to use technology and social media to promote a conversation in which our views would be aired.”

Now, the Obama administration has taken the Bush administration’s initiatives to a new level. Social media, once acknowledged to be passing fad, is now largely regarded as a vital tool in public diplomacy circles.

The Washington Diplomat reports that some embassies and specific diplomats are jumping on the social media bandwagon, joining domestic politicians and other leaders.

“It’s very good to have a Facebook fan page because everybody—especially the younger generation—is on Facebook,” Embassy of Estonia Public and

Cultural Affairs Officer Terje Raadik told The Washington Diplomat. “If you’re not there, you’re not visible.”

A representative for the State Department told the audience at a recent Georgetown University Communication, Culture and Technology Program Symposium that social media is a high priority for the State Department’s outreach strategy, according to Ta3beer.

The official highlighted a few specific initiatives by State in the Middle East, including live debates and discussions in Second Life, virtual meetings with ambassadors and other US officials, and live streaming of important speeches.

Jared Cohen, a new media advisor for Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, told Buxbaum at the International Relations and Security Network that one way social media can aid US government interests is by providing a two-way communication platform.

“Governments can best advocate for things like civil rights and against politically motivated censorship by empowering and expanding the discussion to this broader civil society,” Cohen advised.

Rotana and the Future of Saudi Media

Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal recently announced plans to sell a stake to the public in his media company, Rotana Holding, within two years, according to Bloomberg Business Week.

The last time the Saudi businessman ventured into the Saudi market was in July 2007, when Al-Waleed sold 315 million shares of his investment company, Kingdom Holdings Co., which values at 9.5 billion dollars.

However, the new move is part of the billionaire’s attempt to expand his entertainment, music and news business in the Middle East to meet the rising demands of the industry in the Arab world. While the prince indicated that he will hire an advisor for the initial public

offering, Al-Waleed didn’t specify the size and location of the future share sale.

“An IPO will be happening in the coming two years,” said Al-Waleed in an interview with Bloomberg TV in Riyadh. He added, “We need to brand the company very well before going into an IPO.”

Rotana produces Arabic and English television programs and an entertainment magazine. The company’s radio stations compete with the MBC Group, which is owned by Walid Al-Ibrahim, the brother-in-law of the former Saudi King Fahd.

“Rotana is pretty well known in [the] region, and it is by far a leading company when it comes to entertainment,” said Murad Ansari, a Riyadh-based equities analyst at EFG-Hermes Holding SAE.

Al-Waleed also announced that he may start a new regional news channel, produced outside of the Rotana Group, to compete with Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera. The channel “is something I will be doing personally,” he said, because it “needs a lot of investments up front.”

The business model of the news channel will resemble the model of Rupert Murdoch’s Fox and Sky News channels. This comes as no surprise after Al-Waleed announced the possibility of “future potential” alliances and investments with News Corp earlier this year. Murdoch is chairman and chief executive officer of News Corporation, and the Saudi Prince holds seven percent of the stock.

However, his news channel would broadcast different content, maintained Al-Waleed, catering to the Saudi Muslim nation which has strict laws and no diplomatic relations with Israel.

Despite Al-Waleed’s assurances, his announcement raised concern among Arab audiences as both of Murdoch’s channels are generally perceived to hold negative views and biases towards Arabs and Muslims, writes Iqbal Tamimi for Middle East Online.

“[The channels] project the image of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, ignorant savages, guilty until proven innocent,” notes Iqbal Tamimi, “while at the same time Murdoch never miss an opportunity without declaring his total support of Israel.”

As television is the most important media platform in the Arab world, with the daily viewership exceeding that of Europe by 13 percent, Tamimi and other media analysts speculate that this prospective alliance serves Murdoch's attempt of "occupying the Arab world" through sharing Al-Waleed's regional influence and his wealth of \$18 billion.

Tamimi also questions Al-Waleed's ability to hire employees who are familiar with the current affairs of the region and provide them with professional training in order to be able to steer the news channel's Western-oriented business model to one tailored for the region and its audience.

Seeking production and technology expertise, Rotana agreed to sell a 9.1 percent stake to Murdoch's News Corp. in February for \$70 million. Tamimi hopes that Al-Waleed can keep Murdoch busy with the entertainment aspect of the deal and minimize his influence in the news project.

She concludes that within these conditions, Al-Waleed might be able to "shift the pyramid of news production in the Arab world" and create "a descent professional platform that [represents] the Arab audience not the political systems."

Working on US Image

The recent spin on US withdrawal from the Kornegal Valley in Afghanistan indicates a floundering in the American propaganda machine, stepping away from the previous tradition of creating propaganda to unify the nation according to Scott Taylor for The Chronicle Herald.

The United States, Taylor claims, has been very cautious to prevent the opposition from portraying images depicting US defeat by eliminating "any useful propaganda props." For example, disabled vehicles are always brought into the major military bases. If moving the vehicles proves too risky, allied air weapons obliterate the vehicles so that the Taliban cannot use them as part of a "victory" photo-op.

This attention seems nonetheless

puzzling to many, considering recent statements about Kornegal Valley where shortly after General Stanley McChrystal, commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, withdrew all American troops from the volatile outpost, the Taliban entered the area to "proclaim their victory."

In response, the Pentagon commented that the withdrawal "didn't hurt" efforts, adding that the outpost was of "no strategic value" to the military forces.

Taylor points out the lack of coherence on this statement by the US agency, remarking that it had spent tens of millions of dollars on this combat base, noting that the military's argument is poorly constructed. He adds that the forces created an outpost in the valley to disrupt the insurgents crossing the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Glenn Greenwald at Salon mocks the media's use of the words "decisive" and "make-or-break" to describe certain operations in Afghanistan. "There never is any such thing as 'make-or-break' because we never leave no matter how completely our war and occupation efforts fail," he comments.

Greenwald cites a recent article at The New York Times, which describes the imminent battle of Kandahar as the "make-or-break offensive of the eight-and-a-half-year [Afghanistan] war." He points out that London's Times Online also referred to the "clearly failing" Marjah assault as a "make-or-break assault." The Independent, on the other hand, described Marjah as the Obama administration's "first major -- and possibly decisive test."

Even though Marjah didn't result in an undisputed victory, Greenwald remarks, the government and the media did not "declare the war effort broken and the strategy a failure."

"No, they just pretend it never happened and declare the next, latest, glorious battle the real 'make-or-break decisive test,'" he continues. Greenwald concludes that every subsequent battle will be portrayed in a similar matter, "in an endless tidal wave of war propaganda intended to justify our staying for as long as we want, no matter how pointless and counter-productive [the war] is."

The United States is also engaged in a rhetorical battle with Iranian leaders. In an analysis for Iranian, Tina Ehami discusses the differences between former President Bush and the current US President Barack Obama approaches to wartime propaganda and Iran's nuclear program. Ehami argues that Obama is utilizing a "receptive and diplomatic approach," describing the administration's strategy as "using the propaganda of the enemy against himself."

"The idea behind this new strategy is to focus on the role of the US as a wise and peace loving country wanting to stabilize the Middle East region for humanitarian reasons. While doing so, the Obama administration emphasizes however that the option of a military intervention, if Iran does not cooperate, is still on the table," she observes.

Tina Ehami believes that Obama's approach demonstrates that the current administration has learned from the shortcomings of the Bush era. "The spin doctors of this administration have accepted the learning capability of the public opinion and have become more cautious in their approach of their strategy towards Iran," she concludes.

However, Robert R. Reilly, former director for the Voice of America, at the National Strategy Forum Review views the failures of the American narrative from a different perspective. "Those who insist that America's public diplomacy nightmare in the Middle East is only due to its policies mistake the fundamentally moral nature of the attack," he claims.

Reilly asserts that criticism of the US by Islamists mainly targets the moral basis of American society. "In many Muslim minds, democracy has become equated with unbelief," he comments. Reilly concludes that in order to rebrand the United States, the nation must "address the moral critique of the United States as a godless, secular society immersed in materialism."

Can Obama Resolve The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?

“The Obama administration is eager to solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem,” according to Ivan Eland, columnist for Middle East Online. However, the administration’s prospects for success appear questionable.

US-Israeli relations have been cooling since Israel announced the construction of 1,600 housing units in predominantly Arab East Jerusalem. The announcement came during a visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories by US Vice President Joe Biden to jumpstart the peace process, deeply embarrassing to the Obama administration.

Relations continued to deteriorate between Israel and the US over the Israel’s refusal to halt construction plans. Consequently, diplomatic tensions between the two governments climaxed after US President Barack Obama treated Israeli Prime Minister in a manner that was seen by many as curt and undiplomatic.

According to Eland, American-Israeli relations are facing new realities. Since the end of the Cold War the need for Israel as “an isolated outpost in the Middle East,” is waning. In the meantime, America’s energy security and concerns over terrorism and military commitments in the region means the Arab world remains a priority to US foreign policy.

Eland goes on to state that the president and some top military officials, such as General David Petraeus, seem more focused on the Palestinian side of the conflict than the prior administration. The Obama administration seems to believe that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the satisfaction of the Palestinians is vital to fighting terrorism and improving relations with the Islamic world.

Eland argues that resolving the Palestinian conundrum could eliminate a pretext used by extremist Islamist movements to recruit fighters and target US interests, thereby significantly aiding US efforts

at combating terrorism worldwide.

However, Arnaud De Borchgrave, editor of United Press International, points to the fact that the US cannot be viewed as even-handed by Arab parties when it excludes Hamas from negotiations on a final settlement, despite the fact that group represents a significant segment of the Palestinian population.

In a recent conference dedicated to free speech in Qatar, Doha, 300 participants voted on whether or not they believed President Obama was strong enough to deliver a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. While speakers at the conference believed that the American leader is well-intentioned, 58% of the participants believe that the Obama administration is too weak to deliver peace, reports Global Arab Network.

Some commentators say America’s image will not improve in the Arab and Islamic worlds unless President Obama takes decisive actions to bring the Israeli side to settle with the Palestinians in amiable terms.

Tawfiq Raheem of The Huffington Post argues that all political parties involved in the conflict have reached a stalemate. All the traditional stakeholders in this issue are politically paralyzed. The US must play a balancing act between maintaining strong relationships with Israel and reducing the military and foreign policy burden that comes with it, according to Raheem.

The Jewish voice inside and outside Israel is divided between political reconciliation and military dominance, while Palestinian powers are divided between those who favor diplomacy and those who would opt for the use of force to achieve statehood.

The best prospects for peace are new, peace-minded Israeli and Arab movements, argues Raheem. “Whether or not Obama is too weak or not disregards the fact that Palestinians and Arabs themselves will have to provide strong leadership themselves to lead the way to peace,” he concludes.

Media Award Season in the Gulf Region

Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, chairman of the Rotana Group, received the CEO of the Year in the Media Sector Award during the 2010 CEO Middle East Awards in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, reports Arab News.

According to the news site, “Prince Al-Waleed received the award in recognition of his strong presence, influence and his investments in media and entertainment in the Arab world and beyond.” Farhad Alsukait, COO of the Rotana Group, accepted the award on Prince Al-Waleed’s behalf.

The Rotana Group is one of the most well-known media companies throughout the Middle East. It is a key distributor and producer of Arabic-language movies, and manages the region’s most popular artists. Rotana also owns numerous free-to-air satellite television channels, including the Lebanese Broadcasting Channel and Khalijiyah. The media group also owns radio stations, cafes, and a magazine, employing approximately 1,300 people across the region.

Recognition of the Saudi royalty’s role in media development extended to include other leaders in the Gulf region. According to the Bahrain News Agency, His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa received a Media Creativity Award due to his “Positive Initiative Spirit towards Supporting Media Freedoms” in the Kingdom.

The Kuwaiti Premier, Shaikh Nasser Al-Muhammad Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, presented the award during the opening of the 2010 Arab Media Forum’s seventh session, entitled “Media-Telecommunication Technology.” According to the Bahrain News Agency, the award “reflects the forum’s efforts to highlight policies aimed at providing a favorable climate for development and the role of governments in supporting liberties and positive media work.”

Nabil bin Yagoob Al-Hamar, the King’s Advisor for Media Affairs, accepted the award during the ceremony. He expressed

his pleasure with democratic development in Bahrain, commending the king's efforts to "support freedom of expression as a main pillar of the kingdom's constitution and National Action Charter."

Bahrain's Parliamentary Chairman, Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Dhahrani, congratulated the king on the media award, according to another article at the Bahrain News Agency. The chairman expressed parliamentary support for the royal efforts to "expand the space of responsible media freedom in the kingdom," by adopting legislation to further the cause while preserving national unity.

Other media contributors will be recognized at the 2010 Arab Journalism Awards, will take place on May 12-13 in Dubai, UAE. According to AME Info, the Dubai Press Club released the names of 38 nominees across 10 award categories. Muna Bu Samra, deputy manager of the Arab Journalism Awards, commented, "The total number of highly innovative and unique submissions from across the Arab world reflects the increasing appeal of the most coveted recognition for journalism in the region."

"Preserving religious freedom quite often bolsters stability, peace and prosperity."

Leonard Leo, Chairman of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Each of the categories had three nominees. However, due to a large number of submissions, the "Young Journalist" category had six nominees and three separate awards. Samra pointed out that the volume of entries "reiterates the interest of the youth in the media industry."

While congratulating the candidates, Samra also encouraged future participants to prepare for next year's

awards. "We congratulate the shortlisted candidates, for whom this is a significant accomplishment, considering the stringent selection criteria for all the award categories. We encourage all the participants to submit creative works for the next edition of the Arab Journalism Awards," she stated.

Media not Faithful to Religion

The international media has failed to approach and discuss all religions equally, claims Moroccan blogger Hind Al-Subai Al-Idrisi at Middle East Online. He points out that while all religions have small radical factions that "do not represent the larger group," the media does not use emotional, negative terms like "terrorist, fanatic and fundamentalist" as it does with Islam, to describe them..

"The phrase 'Hindu fanatics' or 'Jewish terrorists' are seldom used [in the media]," Al-Idrisi writes. "It is important...to move away from discussing Islam only in association with terrorism, and toward spreading an understanding of Islam in all its diversity."

This harmonious spirit is not however shared by all in the religious community, writes Chairman of the Muslim Christian Federation International Qazi Abdul Qadeer Khamosh for Common Ground News.

"Interfaith dialogue is criticized by some religious leaders as a conspiracy designed to merge all religions into one," Khamosh writes. "Those perpetrating violence in the name of religion for their own vested interests will not succeed in creating divisions if others come forward as connectors rather than dividers," says Khamosh.

Indeed, the US government is working to enhance religious freedom around the world, writes Leonard Leo, chairman of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in an opinion piece for the Washington Post.

According to Leo, USCIRF delegations have been deployed in the last year to monitor religiously-

motivated confrontations in countries such as Nigeria, Cairo, and Sudan.

"USCIRF's fact-finding missions... underscore that religious freedom is vital to security, prevention of violent religious extremism, establishment of civil society and the rule of law," Leo writes. "Preserving religious freedom quite often bolsters stability, peace and prosperity."

Freedom of the Press in the Middle East: Still in Decline

Freedom House, a Washington-based watchdog organization, reveals in its annual report on international press freedom, for the eighth consecutive year, 2009 has recorded yet another gradual global decline in the state of the freedom of the press, where only one in six people live in countries which allow for such freedom.

The study, titled "Freedom of the Press 2010: A Global Survey of Media Independence," indicated that the biggest setback in press freedom has occurred in Latin America and the former Soviet Union, while Iran and Libya were categorized among the ten worst countries in which "independent media is either nonexistent or barely able to operate," reports Barry Schweid for The Associated Press.

The managing editor of the study, Karin Karlekar, announced that the 21st century has witnessed a contraction of the expansion of independent journalism experienced in the last years of the 20th century following the fall of the Berlin Wall, when new governments eliminate some media restrictions and opened new avenues for expression.

"Unfortunately, the positive changes seen in earlier decades have not been consolidated," Karlekar remarked. More importantly, the notably negative trends in press freedom in China, the Middle East, and parts of Latin America prove worrying for many freedom advocates, as they fear that it could bring upon declines in other political and social freedoms as well, according to The Christian Science Monitor.

“What we’re seeing affecting the press is part of a general trend in freedom around the world,” says Karlekar. “It’s often press freedom that is the first to come under attack, and then that spreads to other freedoms more generally.”

Another attribute to the rise of press freedom had been the introduction of “new media” and the internet to the reporting arena. However, the Freedom House report reveals that these new tools have also taken their share of the global decline, as more government measures are implicated to rein their freedom.

Karlekar pointed out that “the new media have been quite an important part of expanding freedom and then more recently the trend of its retraction, especially in countries where the traditional media were quite limited.” She added, “The new media were an opportunity for a more open space for expression, but now we’re seeing growing efforts to restrict that space.”

Suppressing online media outlets in the Middle East is increasingly becoming the biggest threat facing journalists and the freedom of the press. “In the Middle East the Internet had become the most open source of information,” Karlekar said. “But Egypt, where there’s a ferocious backlash against independent voices and bloggers, is just one example of what’s going on in the region.”

However, the region’s biggest press freedom deterioration was reported in Iran, especially following the latest presidential elections, notes The Associated Press.

“When the Iranian Revolutionary Guards torture a journalist, or communist authorities in China imprison a blogger, 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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