

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy and Arab Media



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

Vol.VII No. 12 June 03-June 16, 2011

Remodeling of Arab Media Shows Promise

The latest technological developments in Arab world broadcasting show significant progress in press freedoms and audience outreach, according to Gulfnews.com. Specifically, the growth of satellite channels has made an exceptional impact by circumventing Arab states' control over the stream of information.

Transitioning those authoritarian regimes in the Middle East previously and currently led by oppressive dictators, these developments demonstrate the influential role of the media in dispersing facts and allowing "social groups or governments alike to present their views effectively in the vital battle for hearts and minds." As Kati Marton, recipient of the United Nations Association's Leo Nevas Prize stated, "Facts are the most potent of all weapons, and dictators know that."

As such, information has become a more powerful force in mobilizing movements since the burgeoning of satellite channels, which communicate more ideas and information from a wide range of sources. Such channels are "crossing national borders without permission or censorship. And with no integrated ideology to indoctrinate the masses, the massive, state-owned media machinery has become almost irrelevant," she said.

Furthermore, the development of satellite channels allows citizens to display perspectives

and beliefs once prohibited by government-controlled media outlets. However, such channels have their flaws, in that there have been gross embellishments and biases in reporting the news. As a result, the credence of broadcasts continues to be questioned.

In tandem with satellite channel developments, ongoing media reforms in Arab countries are creating a strong foundation that may prove to be a model for presenting accurate news with considerable outreach.

For instance, new initiatives to bolster the development of public service media in Tunisia and Egypt are underway, according to ScreenAfrica news. At a conference attended by over "200 delegates representing European and Arabic international institutions, international professional organizations, ambassadors of donor countries, numerous major audiovisual media organizations, and several cooperation and development agencies," participants engaged in discussions assessing the broadcasting needs of Tunisia and Egypt.

Through dialogue, attendees were able to establish top priorities, which included the necessary training of staff such as journalists, acquiring technical equipment, offering international programming, and establishing "regulatory authorities and a new legislative framework."

As the broadcasting framework becomes established, Tunisia also is experiencing a swell in fact-based journalism and the emergence of a multitude of media agencies, writes Florence Pichon of Editorsweblog.org.

Concurrent with the Tunisian Interior Ministry demanding factual journalism in the country, Pichon notes that over 70 media firms have sought licenses for their enterprises in Tunis. Furthermore, Tunisia has surpassed Lebanon as the "best place" in the Arab world for working reporters, and "has taken over in the annual ranking of media freedom by Reporters without Borders."

In addition, Libya has experienced a growth in media outlets as more than 80 burgeoning newspaper and magazine agencies have been established. Even an all-English publication entitled Libya Post has been launched.

However, the abundance of newspapers has also revealed a problem: it has become

In this issue:

Remodeling of Arab Media Shows Promise	1
MENA Transitions at an Impasse	2
Revising Strategies in US Public Diplomacy	3
Arabic Language Content Makes Headway Online	4
Cell Phone Company Claims Arab Spring	5
Internet Outage in Syria	6
Revamping Arab Stereotypes in Cinema	7
DoS Backs Up Communication Initiatives	8
Is Israel Central to US Foreign Policy?	9
References	11

increasingly more difficult to discriminate between news based on opinion versus news based on fact.

“The media are mere tools that allow social groups or governments alike to present their views effectively in the vital battle for hearts and minds.”

*Marwan Al Kabalan,
columnist for Gulf News*

Reassuringly, Pichon suggests that “competition will surely edge out lower quality publications and favor those with better content.” Indeed, “High-quality journalism remains key.”

Since the pressure to create a successful Arab media firm now implies mandatory attention to impartiality and accurate news reporting, broadcasting in the Arab world should continue to prosper and may even one day rival other global media outlets.

To support such enduring prosperity, numerous media conferences have taken place, such as the Arab Media Forum held May 17-18, and the Annual Media and Telecommunications Convergence Conference held in Amman on June 6, reports Gulfnews.com and Rapid TV News. The exchange of dialogue at these forums inevitably will foster new developments in the media and its exploding freedoms, leading to a permanently changed Arab world.

At the June 6 media conference held in Jordan, Princess Sumaya

poignantly concluded, “Our [Arab] world is dynamic; it is demanding; and it is ambitious. It is fuelled by passion and it is empowered by technology. It is creative, it is hopeful and it is not going back to the isolation of the past.”

M E N A Transitions at an Impasse

Now that Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh has given up his rule of the country to the masses of disjointed but persistent factions and tribes calling for his ouster, the momentum for change across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region may be returning, reports The Economist.

According to the article, the retreat of the third Arab dictator since the beginning of the Arab Spring six months ago has the potential to spark optimism and rekindle the flame of revolution in those MENA countries still fighting for democratic transitions of power in their own governments.

Currently, Syria’s relentless president, Bashar al-Assad, maintains his tight grip on the family monarchy, all the while increasing his army’s assaults on unarmed civilians and protesters, thereby sending waves of refugees into bordering Turkey.

In addition, Muammar Qaddafi retains his seat of power in Libya, defying NATO’s constant bombing campaigns and growing threats from the international community that violence against his regime will continue until he concedes defeat. Both of these setbacks had deflated the early momentum felt by Arab protesters across the region after the fall of Tunisia’s and Egypt’s dictators, writes The Economist.

However, the newsmagazine warns that although the momentum for

change across the MENA region may be returning, in no way does Yemen’s successful overthrow of Saleh herald harmony. The author points out, “Yemen is the Arabs’ least governable country. It is unclear what or who comes next there,” referring to the power vacuum left by Saleh’s hurried departure following a direct and harmful attack on his compound.

“In Yemen tribal loyalties far outgun, often literally, those who seek to build democracy and civil institutions,” the author added. The various tribal rivalries, in addition to holdovers from the old regime that retain command over the republican guard and likely will put up a fight, indicate that a smooth or harmonious power transition is highly unlikely in the Arab world’s poorest country.

Another article in The Economist sheds light on the United States’ national security concerns regarding the array of options available in Yemen to fill the subsequent power vacuum left by Saleh. The most troubling for the Obama administration, and arguably the rest of the world, is al-Qaeda’s reportedly growing presence in the southeast of the peninsula.

“Although Mr. Saleh has exaggerated the al-Qaeda threat, extreme Islamists are indeed steadily gaining more room for manoeuvre. Thanks to Yemen’s enfeebled central governance, rugged terrain and rampant poverty, they have been able to thrive,” the article posits. Adding to international concern, The Economist notes, “Mr. Saleh’s American-trained counter-terrorism units have been unable to wipe them out.”

Despite Saleh’s claims that he was a bulwark against the terrorist network, and before the wounded leader left for Saudi Arabia, former Yemeni defense minister Abdullah Ali Eliwa expressed skepticism over Saleh’s commitment to rid the nation of al-Qaeda operatives.

“We’re getting to a tipping point, where groups waiting for a balance of power to change will move,”

veteran analyst in Damascus

Speaking about the recent reports that the city of Zinjibar had fallen to terrorists, Eliwa issued this accusatory statement, signed by nine other senior officers: Mr. Saleh handed Zinjibar to terrorists in order to “frighten people that, if he goes, Yemen will become Somalia.” Now that Saleh is gone, the US and Yemen’s Saudi neighbors must decide how much energy, time and capital to invest to bring even a modicum of stability and peace to the nation.

Just as Yemen’s freedom from Saleh indicates a potential change in momentum for the country and MENA region, the balance of power in Syria may slowly be shifting away from President Bashar al-Assad and toward its unrelenting protesters.

Also appearing in an article by The Economist, news that the regime’s ferocious crackdown on dissenters has actually sparked more intense and dispersed protests may point to growing fissures in the government and an increase in power for Syria’s citizen opposition. Indeed, though Assad’s security and military forces have increased their attacks on civilian protesters, pushing the death toll well past 1,200, resistance to the regime persists and appears to be hardening.

The article discusses the two most important unanswered questions that likely will determine the outcome and stability of Syria’s future. The first is whether the

revolt will reach Damascus, the country’s capital, and Aleppo, its second biggest city.

While the protests have yet to take root in urban areas, Damascus has not been quiet and angry demonstrations have taken place in the heart of the city. Aleppo, on the other hand, “haunted by a crackdown against Islamists in the 1980s and still heavily policed, may be the last city where people will take to the streets en masse. But unrest is growing there too,” the article points out.

Likewise, the newsmagazine reports that a growing number of religious leaders, Syria’s minorities who formerly looked to Assad for protection, and several hundred thousand Palestinians who reside in the country all appear to be turning against the president in favor of the protesters.

“We’re getting to a tipping point, where groups waiting for a balance of power to change will move,” says a veteran analyst in Damascus after clashes on June 6 in Yarmouk, Syria’s largest refugee camp.

The second most important issue for Syria is whether or not President Assad’s security forces will remain loyal to his regime. While they have been Assad’s most powerful and widely used weapon to crush internal dissent, the events of June 5 in the town of Jisr al-Shughour, near the northwestern border with Turkey, suggest that some of the army’s middle and lower ranks are beginning to defect – a prospect that should scare the sitting dictator.

Revising Strategies in US Public Diplomacy

President Barack Obama recently named Los Angeles businessman Sim Farar as a member of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, reports Bizjournal. The commission is charged with appraising US government activities intended to understand, inform and influence foreign publics and to make recommendations on the same to the President, the Secretary of State, the Congress and the public.

A seasoned businessman, Mr. Farar was also the United States Representative to the 54th General Assembly at the United Nations. “I am honored and privileged to be appointed by President Obama and approved by the United States Senate to serve as a Commissioner to the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy and I look forward to working in the International arena during these challenging times,” Farar said in a statement.

In other news, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is stepping up efforts on improving the quality of US international broadcasting, according to a press release by the BBG. “US international broadcasting is facing some tough challenges, not just from growing competition and tight budgets, but also from the increasingly sophisticated crackdowns on free media in many countries around the world,” said BBG chairman Walter Isaacson.

Governors outlined a series of Board actions taken during their first year to drive greater efficiency, and to reform Board operations and governance, including merging staff components of the Agency. Board

members highlighted changes in leadership and programming at Radio and TV Marti, the Persian News network of the Voice of America and the International Broadcasting Bureau.

“US international broadcasting is facing some tough challenges...from the increasingly sophisticated crackdowns on free media in many countries around the world,”

*Walter Isaacson, BBG
Chairman/President*

Yet, Russia Today lampoons the BBG, remarking that “domestic public broadcasting is on the congressional chopping block in the US, but there are more taxpayer dollars for US international broadcasting being spent than ever—\$768 million for 2011 alone.” What is more, according to the English language Russian foreign channel, the BBG is barely known among Americans and the priority granted to the Muslim world is contradictory with its own mission.

Displaying a poor track record on internal affairs, comments the news site, the BBG’s treatment of its own employees has provoked strong criticism from unions. “Blocking sick leave, spying on employees who leave early or make personal phone calls and political interference in the newsroom are all something,” explains the president of the Local 1812 of the American Federation of Government Employees Time

Shamble. Local 1812 is the union that represents BBG employees.

Finally, Russia Today also questioned the neutrality of the Agency, citing lawyer and journalist Eva Golinger who claimed the BBG uses private, internal stations in nations to broadcast pro-America propaganda and incite anti-government fervor in places like Venezuela.

Nevertheless, the BBG is undergoing great changes. For example, when Walter Isaacson championed Voice of America’s decision to shut down its shortwave radio broadcasts to China — and shift those funds to the Internet, cell phones and other forms of digital media — he viewed it as the sensible updating of a propaganda playbook dating from the Cold War, reports The New York Times.

As part of its yearlong review, Mr. Isaacson’s board seeks ways to streamline and modernize Voice of America and its sister networks. To be sure, the broadcasters have made significant strides. Voice of America is inviting listeners to file reports about the uprisings in Bahrain on Facebook, while Radio Free Asia is aggressively developing technology to circumvent firewalls that the Chinese government puts up to block its transmissions.

“Whether it’s Voice of America or my previous employers, CNN or ABC, they need to be on the Internet, on Flickr and on Twitter,” Mr. Ensor said by phone from Kabul, where he was packing to leave.

Arabic Language Content Makes Headway Online

At the Arab Advisers Group’s 8th Annual Media and Telecommunications

Convergence Conference, Princess Sumaya of Jordan highlighted the dramatic growth that Arabic language content is undergoing online, positioning Jordan as the top contributor with 75% of the region’s Arabic content originating from the Kingdom, notes Khetam Malkawi for Istock Analyst.

Focusing on how technology empowers people, Sumaya added, “Leveraging this new landscape is the key to our companies’ and our communities’ future progress and prosperity.”

Carol Bartz, global CEO of Yahoo!, attested that the American digital media company is making strides since procuring Maktoob.com in late 2009, reports Dereck Baldwin for Gulf News. In particular, the corporation is planning to set “the regional online agenda with more Arabic content to reach a growing audience across the Middle East and North Africa.”

“When we look around the world, the Middle East is one of the most exciting markets for us at Yahoo!, with a combination of rapid user growth and a very attractive advertising market with incredible potential,” Bartz told reporters at Yahoo! offices in Dubai.

Commenting on market growth and investment opportunities, she added that the market awaits fresh investment as an increasing number of people in the region join the world Internet community. “As the premier digital media company, we see a huge opportunity in the growth of the web in the Middle East and North Africa,” Bartz continued.

While today, one percent of online content is in Arabic, five percent of the world’s online population speaks Arabic, and the number of Internet users who speak Arabic increased by an astonishing 2,298 per cent from 2000 to 2009, remarked Karim Sabbagh at Booz & Company for

The National. He commented further on the need to have more online content in Arabic as “GCC nations are staking their futures on the development of knowledge economies, and the ability to generate, aggregate and disseminate information.”

“...the Middle East is one of the most exciting markets for us at Yahoo!, with a combination of rapid user growth and a very attractive advertising market with incredible potential.”

Carol Bartz, global CEO of Yahoo!

However, Mr. Sabbagh wondered if the region is “ready for the digital transformation of our economies and digital advancement of our societies.” In the 2010-2011 Global Information Technology Report published by the World Economic Forum, the UAE ranked number 24 in terms of overall network readiness, Qatar ranked 25, Bahrain ranked 30 and Saudi Arabia ranked 33.

While there is still a long way to go, the author praised the adaptation of traditional sources - newspapers, books, music - into digital formats, noting the pivotal role of “truly innovative Arabic digital content [that] fosters new knowledge and offers insights that are not available in any other format.”

Although Sabbagh advocated for subsidies and grants to fund the digital creation of content that has value for individuals, businesses and governments, he also strongly recommended fostering a favorable environment for business innovation, and facilitating the creation of an industry based on digital content. “In doing so,” he concluded, “we can gain the hearts and minds of an entire generation and enable Arabic to claim its right as the language of insights and knowledge in this digital century.”

The Arab Social Media Report in January 2011 showed that over 21 million Facebook users are located in the Arab world. “The fact that some 45 per cent of the UAE population are on Facebook has made it wise and farsighted of the UAE Government to build its profile and presence on the social media,” Salem Khamis Al-Shair, Director General of UAE eGovernment told Khaleej Times.

While social media is a valuable communication and e-Participation tool, Al-Shair emphasized the importance of knowing how to use these media wisely to achieve desired organizational objectives. The Emirates e-Government, in collaboration with the Dubai School of Government, UAE Government entities, information technology research firm Gartner Inc, and the United Nations e-Government Program, accordingly developed guidelines for social media usage in the UAE to deal with this set of rules.

“This document offers policy guidelines to government entities in the country on how to utilize social media tools in a responsible, safe and effective manner to communicate with their clients and public and engage them in designing and delivering government programs and services,” he noted.

Al-Shair argued each government body should form a social

media unit to develop relevant indicators to measure the impact of engaging with the public through new media tools, and receive educational and awareness-raising programs to understand these methods.

Cell Phone Company Claims Arab Spring

The Egyptian branch of Vodafone, an international communications company, is under fire after publicly suggesting it was the catalyst for the revolution that resulted in the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, reports the Daily Mail.

According to London-based Channel 4 News, the controversy stems from a three-minute video that was posted on YouTube by JWT, an advertising agency connected to the Vodafone Group. The video includes clips from Vodafone’s “Our Power” advertising campaign that ran during the weeks leading up to the revolution in January.

Additionally, the YouTube video incorporates images from the mass protests that took place in Cairo’s famed Tahrir Square, with Vodafone claiming that while it did not start the revolution, it “reminded Egyptians how powerful they are,” thereby inspiring the January events.

Egyptian online activists, including blogger Mohamed El-Dahshan, are enraged that Vodafone would imply it played such a pivotal role in motivating the masses, thereby undermining the efforts of the Egyptian public.

“Never mind the years of activism, the protests, the decades of cumulated grievances, the terrible economic situation,

the trampled political freedoms, the police brutality, the torture,” El-Dahshan told The Guardian.

“All companies in Egypt are trying to use revolutionary and nationalist imagery right now to drive sales.”

Ramy Raouf, activist with the Egyptian Initiative For

Personal Rights

Many believe Vodafone’s claims insult those who lost their lives during the uprisings in Egypt, and constitute an attempt to boost sales in the aftermath of the revolution. Ramy Raouf, an activist with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, explained to the Daily Mail, “All companies in Egypt are trying to use revolutionary and nationalist imagery right now to drive sales.”

Egyptians also take issue with the fact that Vodafone, along with other telecommunications companies, complied with government orders to shut off services during the revolution. Likewise, the Daily Mail writes, the company is being accused of providing government officials with personal information about opposition forces.

In response to public outrage, Hatem Dowidar, the CEO of Vodafone Egypt, denies having prior knowledge of the video. Channel 4 News reports that Dowidar maintains that Vodafone has strict policies preventing it from associating itself with political or religious movements.

Raouf, referring to the communications companies,

insists they are “the ones who handed out our personal information to state security, the ones who shut down our lines and who helped the government cut us off – it’s too far. People are talking about compensation but we don’t want money. We want to see people on trial.”

Internet Outage in Syria

A large majority of the Syrian population lost Internet access on June 3, reports Barry Levine at NewsFactor Network.

According to Renesys, an Internet monitoring firm, about two-thirds of all Syrian networks were “unreachable” early that morning. Within half an hour, 40 of the 59 networks were withdrawn from the global routing table. Although some government networks were among those unaffected by the shutdown, Renesys acknowledged that even they were “slow to respond” or completely inoperable.

At ZDNet, Steven J. Vaughan-Nichols recounts that the Syria News website confirmed the rumors brewing both within the country and abroad. “The Syrian government has cut off Internet service (3G, DSL, Dial-up) all across the country, including government institutions,” the website reported. Later, the article was amended to say that the Internet was available in certain parts of Syria, but “broken” in Damascus, Aleppo and throughout the provincial areas.

In response to the changing reports, Vaughan-Nichols remarks, “This sounds to me like the officials are making up their story on the fly.” He adds, “This, in turn, suggests that Syria’s dictatorship hadn’t really thought out the ramifications of turning off the Internet.”

Vaughan-Nichols goes on to say that the government largely controls the population’s Internet access. Case in point, the government owns the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE), which provides DSL and dial-up services to businesses and individuals. Although Syrians living in larger cities can access 3G and 3.5G wireless Internet through several providers, Vaughan-Nichols points out that they all “operate on the government’s sufferance.”

Following the media whirlwind surrounding the shutdown, Internet access was restored on June 4, reports Damon Poeter for PC Magazine.

While discussing the Internet shutdown in Syria, commentators often made comparisons to the other Arab revolutions. “The Internet shutdown in Syria,” Poeter observed, “is reminiscent of a government shutdown of the Internet in Egypt during that country’s Arab Spring protests in January.”

Similar to Egypt, protests flourished and demonstrators were energized following the shutdown in Syria. Protesters who were able to transmit information posted stories about the torture and death of 13-year-old Hamza Al-Khatib, who has since become a symbol of the Syrian uprising.

Today, violence continues in the country, as at least 15 people were killed in protests that took place on June 10 in cities including Al-Qamishli, Tabqa, Abu Kamal, Al-Mayadin, Basira, Ras El-Ein, and Damascus, reports CNN.

In Maaret Al-Nourman and Idlib, Syrian state TV claimed “armed gangs” were shooting at security force headquarters and “setting various public and security forces and police institutions on fire.” An activist source for CNN claimed that tens of thousands of people were in the streets when security forces and an attack helicopter opened fire on the

crowd.

“The decision to shut down Internet access and cell phone networks, to block broadcasters and prevent journalists from doing their job is not acceptable.”

*Irina Bokova, UNESCO
Director-General*

“Some demonstrators used their personal weapons, including hunting rifles and AK-47s, to detain a number of members of security forces,” the news site reports. The source did not confirm whether the protesters shot at the security forces.

Although there is no sign of declining violence in Syria, some observers estimate that more than 1,200 have been killed and more than 10,000 have been arrested since the demonstrations began in March 2011.

Throughout the turmoil, the United Nations has been firm in defending the Syrian people. “The rights of citizens must be respected, as must the rights and security of journalists,” asserted UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova.

She stipulated, “This includes the right to freedom of expression, the need to access information and the ability to communicate. The decision to shut down Internet access and cell phone networks, to block broadcasters and prevent journalists from doing their job is not acceptable.”

The UN, in general, has

targeted countries that restrict Internet access to its citizens and visitors. The Los Angeles Times reports that Frank La Rue, the Special Rapporteur to the United Nations, published an article arguing that access to the Internet is a human right.

“Given that the Internet has become an indispensable tool for realizing a range of human rights, combating inequality, and accelerating development and human progress, ensuring universal access to the Internet should be a priority for all states,” said La Rue. He further opined that access is vital during times of political upheaval, citing the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia as examples.

The report emphasized the need for social media platforms in areas where state-run media reports a significant proportion of the news. “They enable individuals to share critical views and find objective information,” La Rue said about such tools.

Although he acknowledged that providing Internet access to everyone throughout the world “cannot be achieved instantly,” the Special Rapporteur reminded national leaders “of their positive obligation to promote or to facilitate the enjoyment of the right of freedom of expression and the means necessary to exercise this right, including the Internet.”

Revamping Arab Stereotypes in Cinema

The Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan launched an online exhibit exploring Arab stereotypes that have persisted throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, reports Jeff Karoub at Google News.

The exhibit, “Reclaiming

Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes,” provides visitors with commentary and information about books, paintings, films and music that showcases the Arab culture as “exotic, uncivilized and threatening.” The website also offers access to video interviews with Arab Americans and discusses their contributions to US culture and society.

“We wanted to make the knowledge of how Arabs have been represented in culture more accessible to the public,” noted Evelyn Al-Sultany, exhibit curator and University of Michigan assistant professor. She traced the first images of stereotypes back to the 1880s, when a larger number of Arabs immigrated to the US.

Reportedly, the Arab-Israeli War of the 1960s brought about the stereotype of the Arab as a terrorist. Karoub also cites modern sources of these stereotypes, such as the 1994 film “True Lies,” which portrays Arabs negatively. However, he acknowledges that “films have a longer history of presenting [Arab] women as belly-dancers and seductive-yet-veiled members of harems.”

Referring to the new online exhibit, Al-Sultany adds “We’re hoping people will leave the site with a vivid sense of this discrepancy between who Arab Americans are in their diversity and the actual limited, restricting stereotypes.”

At GlobalPost, Daniella Cheslow also discusses Arab stereotypes in films. She references Emory University professor Jack Shaheen, who published *Reel Bad Arabs* in 2001. In his book, Shaheen analyzed the portrayal of Arabs in 900 movies produced between 1896 and 2001. Referring to the question of what Arabs are “really like,” Shaheen shows that “In countless films, Hollywood alleges the answer: Arabs are brute murders, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women,”

he concluded.

Mohammad Bakri, the director of “Jenin Jenin” (2002), and actor in more than 30 films, acknowledged the existence of stereotypes, adding that filmmakers do not take cultural and national nuances into consideration. “Never mind who they are --- Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine: they are all the same color, which is bad,” he stated.

“We’re hoping people will leave the site with a vivid sense of this discrepancy between who Arab Americans are in their diversity and the actual limited, restricting stereotypes.”

Evelyn Al-Sultany, exhibit curator Secretary General

However, others pointed out that Arabs are their own harshest critics. “The image of the Arab and of the petrodollar in Egyptian films is even worse than in American films,” observed Samir Farid, Egyptian film critic and author.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Arabs in the media, some people in the industry believe that the events of the Arab Spring will change Hollywood’s approach to defining the culture. Palestinian filmmaker George Khleifi stated the advent of the satellite and the Internet brought the events of the Arab Spring to light for

all Americans to see. “There is a revolution and Arabs are not who [Americans] thought they were,” he stated.

Bakri noted that American filmmakers offer different perspectives on Vietnam and Native Americans, and that this has recently extended to include films challenging the stereotypical portrayal of Arabs. For example, he mentioned “Rendition” (2007), which tells the story of an Egyptian man detained and tortured due to false terrorism charges.

As the Western perception of Arabs shifts from dangerous terrorists to pro-democracy revolutionaries, Alan Philips at The National argues that Americans still miss the mark. He criticizes New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman for his list of reasons driving the Arab uprisings.

Friedman’s list included the election of an African-American president in the US, the influence of Google Earth in displaying unequal land distribution in Bahrain, and the Beijing Olympics.

“The message was that Arabs were incapable of making up their own minds, and could only rely on foreign - mainly American - gifts to rouse them from their lethargy,” Philips argues, stating that such views fail to capture the history of rebellion in Arab countries, as well as the cultural nuances that separate the Jordanians from the Syrians, the Egyptians from the Tunisians, and the Saudis from the Yemenis.

He goes on to say that a more accurate and thoughtful portrayal of the uprisings and other events in the region “has to start by avoiding generalizations about the Arab world or the ‘Arab identity.’” Although the Internet has connected Arabs throughout the world, Philips argues that “deep differences among the Arab states” persist.

Additionally, Tariq Al-Homayed laments the negative consequences of political and cultural differences between Arabs at Asharq-Alawsat, accusing the Arab world writ large of ignoring the plight of Syrian citizens. “Footage was released every day revealing the crimes committed by the regime against the Syrians, and still the Arabs did not speak,” he bemoaned.

He questioned how Arabs could unite on the issue of Libyan leader Muammar Al-Gaddafi, while the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League have not been able to take a stand against Bashar Al-Assad’s regime.

“It is sad that the Iranian regime, along with Hassan Nasrallah and some in Lebanon, which itself is a country in need of a moral and political revolution, are standing with the regime in Damascus, while the Arabs so far have not stood with the defenseless Syrian people who long for freedom and dignity,” Al-Homayed observed. Ultimately, he urged Arabs to overlook differences, national interest, and politics and instead unite on the issues of ethical and humanitarian values.

DoS Backs Up Communication Initiatives

The Department of State is stepping up efforts to facilitate communication among social groups following the uprisings in the Middle East through training programs in the region, reports MyFox DC. The agency is financing the development of technology that would enable people to communicate wirelessly without running the risk of being discovered by government officials in oppressive countries.

Evidently, State acknowledges that the Arab Spring considerably

enhanced the use of social media outlets to foster freer communication and movements. MyFox DC references a statement made at a London defense forum by General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commenting, "What brought down Mubarak was Facebook and social networking, a leaderless organization that rose up and we call the Arab Spring... So in the context of a viral world, we are trying to build an army that meets requirements." In response to mass mobilization of the opposition, authoritarian regimes have led various crackdowns on the population; blocking communications, banning foreign reporters, and controlling the flow of information through state-run media.

"What brought down Mubarak was Facebook and social networking... So in the context of a viral world, we are trying to build an army that meets requirements."

*General Martin Dempsey,
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs
of Staff*

According to The Daily Star, the State Department is also involved in the Leaders for Democracy Fellowship (LDF) program at the American University of Beirut. After six years of successfully running the program, this is the first year that it will be implemented in the Middle East.

The program's goal is to train

12 fellows in developing critical writing skills, public speaking, media relations, and political analysis through various lectures and workshops, in addition to internships that are offered with a number of local companies.

Yet, the LDF raises several questions regarding the role of the US government in the region. A former journalist, Namees Arnous explains to The Daily Star that she resigned from her position at an Egyptian television station when she found out the owner was pro-Mubarak.

"During the revolution ... [Mubarak's supporters] called us, the people who demonstrated in Tahrir Square, agents for America...It is not like that, but ... I want to know the point of view of the U.S. on this," Arnous argued.

"America did not put people on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, Sanaa, Manama or Damascus. It was the people themselves who launched these movements and who must determine their outcome," US Ambassador Maura Connelly, speaking at the launch of the program at AUB, explained. "It is difficult to imagine a more important or more urgent time to undertake this kind of fellowship program."

Is Israel Central to US Foreign Policy?

On June 5, the anniversary of Israel's defeat in 1967 referred to as the naqsa, Palestinian refugees attempted to cross into Israel via the Syrian-Israeli border, ultimately resulting in 24 deaths by Israeli troops, reports the The Economist.

Although Syrian officials maintain that Israel is at fault for the refugees' deaths, Israelis disagree and claim that ten demonstrators were killed "when their own Molotov cocktails

triggered border anti-tank mines."

Nonetheless, The Economist suggests that such an assault by Palestinian refugees reinforces Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's claim that the Palestinians want their future state to comprise all of its former lands nullify the existence of Israel.

Regardless of Israel's responsibility for the violence, Netanyahu continues to enjoy positive ratings in domestic opinion polls, particularly after he rejected President Obama's suggestion to base Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on the 1967 borderlines (which would include land swaps).

Nevertheless, the prime minister encounters critics at home as well, especially in the form of Meir Dagan, who until January led Mossad, Israel's foreign-intelligence service for eight years. Dagan lacks confidence in Netanyahu's judgment and goes as far as to suggest the prime minister and his defence minister, Ehud Barak, "may even decide to bomb Iran's nuclear plants to deflect attention from what Mr. Barak has called the 'tsunami' in September."

A pivotal turning point will occur in that month when members of the United Nations will vote on whether to recognize Palestinian statehood. Yet, as political friction over the issue deepens in Israel, the US must look to its own domestic populace during a tense upcoming presidential election to determine its stance on the UN vote.

Already, one of the key topics for US political debate in the 2012 election includes US foreign policy towards Israel and the Palestinians. Hilary Krieger of The Jerusalem Post maintains that the "Republicans see the Jewish state as a major line of attack in the 2012 campaign."

In line with the Republican perception that Obama is incapable of advancing Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Governor Mitt Romney, who recently announced his intention to run for president, capitalized on Obama's failures toward Israel.

During the announcement for his presidential run, Romney remarked that the incumbent Obama "speaks with firmness and clarity, however, when it comes to Israel, he seems firmly and clearly determined to undermine our longtime friend and ally. He's treating Israel the same way so many European countries have: with suspicion, distrust and an assumption that Israel is somehow at fault."

"Republicans see the Jewish state as a major line of attack in the 2012 campaign."

Hilary Krieger, reporter for The Jerusalem Post

Furthermore, 2012 presidential candidate Michele Bachmann also took advantage of the topic during her candidacy announcement, declaring her unwavering support for Israel on numerous occasions. Krieger notes that even among Republicans who are still considering a run for president, Israel remains the decisive issue that requires all potential candidates to determine their position on the matter.

Simultaneously, Democrats have been amending possible losses of public support for Obama's reelection campaign, particularly after his controversial suggestion to utilize 1967 borderlines for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Political support for Obama has come from numerous political players, including Debbie Wasserman, head of the Democratic National Committee, who reassured Obama's continued support for Israel. Most significantly, the supportive remarks from former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, deemed the most "high-profile push-back," have proven crucial in avoiding loss of political support for Obama.

In defense of the President's approach to the issue, Robert Grenier writing for Al-Jazeera, argues that Obama "never suggested an actual return to the 1967 borders - only their use as a reference point for agreed land swaps to accommodate Israeli settlement blocs. As such, the specific complaints from Netanyahu and his legion of US supporters are both disingenuous and politically mischievous."

Ultimately, US politicians' varied interpretations of Obama's proposed policy towards Israel will continue to be vocalized and certainly impact the prospect of his reelection in 2012.

References

- [1] Remodeling of Arab Media Shows Promise
June 2, 2011. "Supporting Tunisian and Egyptian broadcast media". ScreenAfrica. <http://www.screenafrica.com/page/news/africa/638377-Supporting-Tunisian-and-Egyptian-broadcast-media>
June 8, 2011. "Dubai Press Club hails Arab Media Forum". Gulfnews.com. <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/media/dubai-press-club-hails-arab-media-forum-1.818980>
Al-Kabalan, Marwan. June 10, 2011. "Is the media part of the problem?" Gulfnews.com. <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/is-the-media-part-of-the-problem-1.819656>
Hawkes, Rebecca. June 8, 2011. "Arabic content and media convergence help shape Middle East lives". Rapid TV News. <http://www.rapidtvnews.com/index.php/2011060812692/arabic-content-and-media-convergence-help-shape-middle-east-lives.html#ixzz1P5Ecw9p>
Pichon, Florence. June 10, 2011. "Arab spring invigorates newspapers and journalism in the region". Editorsweblog.org. http://www.editorsweblog.org/newspaper/2011/06/arab_spring-invigorates_newspapers_and_j.php
- [2] MENA Transitions at an Impasse
May 19, 2011. "The Arab Spring's Impact on U.S.-Iran Rivalry". PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/05/the-arab-springs-impact-on-us-iran-rivalry.html>
June 2, 2011. "Tribes at war". The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/node/18775947>
June 9, 2011. "The balance of power is shifting". The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/node/18805738>
June 9, 2011. "Who's next?" The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/node/18805423>
Giridharadas, Anand. June 3, 2011. "The Longer Arc of a Revolutionary's Life". The New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/04/world/africa/04iht-currentso4.html?_r=3
- [3] Revising Strategies in US Public Diplomacy
June 3, 2011. "Board Outlines Progress on Agency Reforms and Announces Steven Korn to be RFE President". BBG. http://www.bbg.gov/pressroom/press-releases/Public_Meeting_June2011.html
June 3, 2011. "US international broadcasting falling on deaf ears". Russia Today. http://rt.com/usa/news/usa-broadcasting-falling-deaf-ears/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitterBBG%20on%20baord%20meetin
June 7, 2011. "Sim Farar named to commission by Obama". Bizjournal. <http://www.bizjournals.com/losangeles/news/2011/06/07/sim-farar-named-to-commission-by-obama.html>
- [4] Arabic Language Content Makes Headway Online
Baldwin, Derek. June 11, 2011. "Yahoo! looks to provide more Arabic content". Gulf News. <http://gulfnews.com/business/technology/yahoo-looks-to-provide-more-arabic-content-1.819927>
Malkawi, Khetam. June 7, 2011. "75% of online Arabic content originates in Jordan". Istock Analyst. <http://www.istockanalyst.com/business/news/5212216/75-of-online-arabic-content-originates-in-jordan>
Sabbagh, Karim. June 9, 2011. "Another golden age for Arabic knowledge beckons online". The National. <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/industry-insights/>
media/another-golden-age-for-arabic-knowledge-beckons-online
Shaaban, Ahmed. June 9, 2011. "Govt departments joining Facebook". Khaleej Times. http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle08.asp?xfile=data/theuae/2011/June/theuae_June264.xml§ion=theuae
- [5] Cell Phone Company Claims Arab Spring
June 3, 2011. "Vodafone denies using Arab Spring to sell phones". Channel 4 News. <http://www.channel4.com/news/vodafone-denies-using-arab-spring-to-sell-phones>
June 5, 2011. "Vodafone slammed for releasing advert taking credit for its role in Arab Spring revolution". Daily Mail. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1394303/Vodafone-slammed-releasing-advert-taking-credit-role-Arab-Spring-revolution.html#ixzz1P5BHdYHd>
- [6] Internet Outage in Syria
June 3, 2011. "United Nations report: Internet access is a human right." Los Angeles Times: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2011/06/united-nations-report-internet-access-is-a-human-right.html>.
June 10, 2011. "At least 15 killed in Syrian protests." CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/06/10/syria.unrest/>.
Levine, Barry. June 3, 2011. "Syria Shuts Down Internet Service to Contain Revolt." NewsFactor Network: http://www.newsfactor.com/news/Syria-Shuts-Down-Internet-Access/story.xhtml?story_id=003000C9B9PU.
Poeter, Damon. June 4, 2011. "Syrian Internet Restored, Violent Videos of Street Protest Emerge." PC Magazine: <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2386417,00.asp>.
Vaughan-Nichols, Steven J. June 3, 2011. "Syria shuts down the Internet." ZDNet: <http://www.zdnet.com/blog/networking/syria-shuts-down-the-internet/1127>.
- [7] Revamping Arab Stereotypes in Cinema
2011. <http://www.arabstereotypes.org/>
Alhomayed, Tariq. June 12, 2011. "Syria and the Arab silence... Again". Asharq-Alawsat. <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=2&id=25511>
Cheslow, Daniella. June 5, 2011. "Hollywood: Why are Arabs always the bad guys?". GlobalPost. <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/culture-lifestyle/entertainment/110510/hollywood-arab-stereotypes-lawrence-of-arabia?page=0,0>
Karoub, Jeff. June 7, 2011. "From harems to terrorism: Dearborn museum website aims to explore, overcome Arab stereotypes". Google News. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/canadianpress/article/ALEqM5gA5UFN4KGOE8jQaRX36rg-S1qDZQ?docId=7080596>
Philps, Alan. June 3, 2011. "The nuance of Arab identity is still being lost on the West". The National. <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/the-nuance-of-arab-identity-is-still-being-lost-on-the-west>
- [8] DoS Backs Up Communication Initiatives
June 12, 2011. "US Funding 'Shadow' Networks To Aid Arab Revolutions". MyFox DC. http://www.myfoxdc.com/dpps/news/us-funding-%27shadow%27-networks-to-aid-arab-revolutions-dpgonc-km-20110612_13645917#ixzz1P5JLyby9
Slemrod, Annie. June 7, 2011. "U.S.-backed program trains young leaders of Arab Spring protests". The Daily Star. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/Jun-07/US-backed-program-trains-young-leaders-of-Arab-Spring-protests.ashx#ixzz1P5DxRA4f>
- [9] Is Israel Central to US Foreign Policy?
June 9, 2011. "Don't think about September: Israel's belligerent

prime minister likes to deflect his people's attention". The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/node/18805766>

Grenier, Robert. June 5, 2011. "On deaf ears: Obama's message to Israel". Al-Jazeera. <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/06/20116494815209668.html>

Krieger, Hilary L. June 5, 2011. "Israel to be major subject of US political debate in 2012". The Jerusalem Post. <http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=223617>

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.